

Nomos, Kosmos & Dike in Plutarch

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(eds.)

EUNOMIA IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH. PLUTARCH'S *NOMOS* BETWEEN RHETORIC AND SCIENCE

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Abstract

Against the Epicureans, Plutarch holds that philosophy and religion are more important for society than statute laws. Given the analogy between the politician and the god-creator of the harmonious cosmos, rulers and their laws should, then, humbly imitate god and his divine law of Justice, thereby having only persuasion as a tool. It is argued that the rhetorical concept of persuasion plays an equally important role in the way the god, according to Plutarch (as a Platonist) has created the cosmos: divine persuasion overcame the laws of nature. The prescriptive character of this persuasion, however, conflicts with our modern concept of the descriptive character of physical laws.

1. Statute law and divine law: prescribing ethics

Statute laws, as a product of human legislation, are one of the cornerstones of democratic societies: they distinguish them from theocratic regimes, and, in that they are products of public debate, from aristocratic regimes that rule at their own discretion. Even more, according to Isocrates in his *Nicoles* 9, human legislation is a characteristic of, and even a condition for living in society: laws prescribe how individuals should behave when living together, and thus they set us free from the way of life of animals (τοῦ θηριωδῶς ζῆν). The Epicureans would agree to that. Colotes at least, in Plutarch's *Adversus Colotem* (1124D), affirms:

Those men who appointed laws and usages and established the government of cities by kings and magistrates brought human life into a state of great security and peace and delivered it from turmoil (θορύβων). But if anyone takes all this away, we shall live a life of brutes (θηρίον βίον) ...

In this light, it would testify to a naïve optimism if one would uphold the maxim “ὁ μηδὲν ἀδικῶν οὐδενὸς δεῖται νόμου”. Still, Plutarch would be inclined to go with the motto to a certain extent, and not simply because he dislikes the Epicureans. In his opinion, even if there were no laws, we would still have philosophy to guide us on the road to virtue: “we would do freely at the bidding of our reason, as Xenocrates says, what we do now at the command of the law”. Besides, “the very legislation that Colotes praises provides first and foremost for our belief in the gods” (1125). Philosophy and religion, then, are foundational for society. In *To the uneducated ruler* 5, just like the young philosopher in *Progress in Virtue* §10 is compared to the one who is initiated

into the Mysteries and then sees a great light, so the ruler copies the light of justice god has established in the cities as an image of his Reason. The cardinal concept is expressed in the repeatedly quoted passage from Plato, *Laws* 4, 715e-716a¹:

God who, as old tradition tells, holdeth the beginning, the end and the center of all things that exist, completeth his circuit by nature's ordinance in a straight, unswerving course. With followeth Justice always, as avenger of those that fall short of the divine law; and she, again, is followed by every man who would fain be happy, cleaving to her with lowly and orderly behaviour; but he who is uplifted by vainglory, or prideth himself on his riches ..., and through his pride joined to youth and folly, is inflamed in soul with insolence, dreaming that he has no need of ruler or guide, etc.

Rulers and their laws should, then, humbly imitate god and his divine law. And then, the key concepts are that of the "excellent professional" and "δημιουργός", applied to the god as well as to the politician. One may compare² *De communibus notitiis* 1065F:

but Zeus the paternal and supreme and righteous and, as Pindar calls him, master craftsman fashioned the universe (ὁ δὲ πατρῷος καὶ ὑπατος καὶ θεμίστιος Ζεὺς καὶ ἀριστοτέχνας, κατὰ Πίνδαρον, ... δημιουργῶν τὸν κόσμον) not ... as a drama but as a town common (κοινὸν ἄστυ) to gods and men who should live lawful partners in right and virtue concordantly and blissfully (συννοησομένων μετὰ δίκης καὶ ἀρετῆς ὁμολογουμένως καὶ μακαρίως), and for the attainment of this most fair and most majestic goal (τέλος) what need had he of pirates and murderers and parricides and tyrants?

with *Precepts of Statecraft* 807B-C:

For truly it is an outrageous and abominable thing if a pilot selects sailors and a ship's captain selects a pilot "well knowing how at the stern to hold steady the tiller etc." and an architect chooses subordinates and handicraftsmen who will not spoil his work, but will cooperate to perfect it, whereas the statesman, who is, with a term from Pindar, the artist *par excellence* and the creator of lawfulness and justice (ἀριστοτέχνας τις ὢν κατὰ Πίνδαρον, καὶ δημιουργός

¹ For an analysis of the cluster of parallels to which this passage belongs, see L. VAN DER STOCKT 2004: 137-149.

² For an analysis of the cluster of parallels to which this passage belongs, see L. VAN DER STOCKT 2002: 115-140.

εὐνομίας καὶ δίκης), does not immediately choose friends whose convictions are like his own, who will aid him and share his enthusiasm for what is noble (πρὸς τὸ καλόν).

The analogy between the agent in the sphere of statute law and in that of divine law is almost perfect, except that the human ruler is only “a kind of” (τις) artist *par excellence*. Since the perfect artist by definition reaches his goal, this implies that installing the law of justice on a human level is more problematic than on the divine, cosmic level; installing lawfulness and justice in human society is but a goal, whilst at the cosmic level, it is a fact, brought about by the divine agent. Apart from his character, the politician has but one tool, as *Precepts of Statecraft* §5 argues; it is that of πειθῶ, capable of “softening by persuasion and overcoming by charms the fierce and violent spirit of the people”; the politician cannot “gain power and rule the multitude (ἐξισχύσαι καὶ κρατῆσαι τῶν πολλῶν) unless he possesses persuasion and attractive speech” (801E). The politician as an artist processes the people’s (irrational³) spirit with the tool of persuasion. We must now examine the procedure of the artist-δημιουργός when he created the harmonious cosmos. This, however, will involve another concept of lawful harmony.

2. Prescribing law and “law of nature”

2.1. Dual causation: explaining and understanding the cosmos

The modern perspective in which science or scientific activity is undertaken is different from the one of the Ancients. From our contemporary point of view, science is an activity that seeks to acquire true and valid knowledge; acquiring this knowledge may be considered an end in itself, or, given the predicting value of physical laws, a means of controlling the course of events. By contrast, Aristotle – I refer to Aristotle because he is often regarded as the most ‘scientific’ of the classical philosophers – would emphasize that the ‘theoretical’ way of life is an end and a gratification in itself, that the pleasure or happiness that is experienced in the exercise of this intelligence is the fruit of the exercise of something divine in man⁴, and that the perfection of the theoretical life is wisdom⁵.

It is legitimate, then, to ask what are implications of the interference of an ethical category such as ‘wisdom’, and of a ‘divine’ agent, with Greek scientific activity. More specifically, one might suspect that those factors would blind the scientist when he scrutinizes Nature and seeks to discover ‘how it works’.

³ On the irrational character of the people, see J. CARRIÈRE 1984: 166, n. 4.

⁴ Cf. P. HADOT 1995: 126.

⁵ P. HADOT 1995: 137.

Admittedly, the distinction between the spiritual and ethical on the one hand, and the material world on the other hand, is nowadays no longer clear-cut, and a definition of science as ‘the study of the material world’ would no longer do⁶. But we would not call the question ‘To what end does the world exist?’ a scientific question, but a philosophical (namely metaphysical) or religious one. Yet the answer to that question was the culmination of ancient philosophy: φυσιολογία ended in metaphysics, theology and teleology, and we cannot take it for granted that teleological speculations did not interfere with the unbiased observation of how Nature works.

This legitimates the question whether Plutarch had any notion of what we call ‘a law of nature’, or ‘a scientific law’, or ‘a physical law’. In our modern understanding, a scientific law⁷ can be formulated as a statement, based on observation, of a general and universal and eternal relation between natural phenomena. The statement is synthetic (not analytical) and expresses a causal relationship between observable facts. Scientific laws exist even without men knowing or formulating them; they operate solely and coercively on the basis of the natural characteristics of matter. They are descriptive and have predictive value; they are not prescriptive, like statute laws.

In Plutarch’s Academic Platonism, things are more complicated, “the concept of dual causality” being “an essential component of Plutarch’s Platonism”⁸. I point to only three important texts:

a. *Life of Pericles* 6.2-3:

A story is told that once on a time the head of a one-horned ram was brought to Pericles from his country-place, and that Lampon the seer, when he saw how the horn grew strong and solid from the middle of the forehead, declared that, whereas there were two powerful parties in the city, that of Thucydides and that of Pericles, the mastery would finally devolve upon one man, - the man to whom this sign had been given. Anaxagoras, however, had the skull cut in two, and showed that the brain had not filled out its position, but had drawn together to a point, like an egg, at that particular spot in the entire cavity where the root of the horn began. At that time, the story says, it was Anaxagoras who won the plaudits of the bystanders; but a little while after it was Lamprias, for Thucydides was overthrown, and Pericles was entrusted with the entire control of all the interests of the people.

Now there was nothing, in my opinion, to prevent both of them, the naturalist and the seer, from being in the right of the matter; the one correctly divined the cause, the other the object or purpose. It was the proper province of the

⁶ J. ZIMAN 1980: 36-37.

⁷ See J. HOSPERS 1980: 104-111.

⁸ J. OPSOMER 1998: 183.

one to observe why anything happens, and how it comes to be what it is; of the other to declare for what purpose anything happens, and what it means. And those who declare that the discovery of the cause, in any phenomenon, does away with the meaning, do not perceive that they are doing away not only with divine portents, but also with artificial tokens, such as the ringing of gongs, the language of fire-signals, and the shadows of the pointers on sundials. Each of these has been made, through some causal adaptation, to have some meaning⁹.

In the *Life of Pericles*, Anaxagoras conducts a dissection and explains the anomalous phenomenon of the one-horned ram on the basis of natural (anatomical) causes (ἐκ τίνων γέγονε καὶ πῶς πέφυκε), namely the deformity of the ram's brain; this is what Plutarch calls the αἰτία. "However, P.'s description cannot be accurate. An animal so deformed would not have lived long enough to grow its "strong, solid" horn, nor is there in fact any relation between the horn and the skull (much less the brain)"¹⁰. But whether or not Anaxagoras could ever have made the impossible observation of the brain's deformity, is no problem for Plutarch: he simply regards the reported fact as historically true, and accepts Anaxagoras' explanation. Now Anaxagoras was not to be criticized: he did his job as a φυσικός, and he was Pericles' teacher, and in that capacity responsible for the lofty grandeur of Pericles' mental disposition and of his eloquence.

But nor was there anything wrong with the explanation of the seer Lampron. He pointed out the τέλος of the incident: πρὸς τί γέγονε καὶ τί σημαίνει. He did his job as a μάντις: he interpreted the phenomenon as a divine omen. There is some stress on the validity of his prediction, because it conveniently foresees the historical fact of Pericles' rise to power. And apparently this must compensate for our surprise: the anecdote about Anaxagoras' φυσιολογία, we would have expected, was introduced as an example of Anaxagoras setting Pericles free from δεισιδαιμονία, whilst what we get is a defense of a religious causation...

Anyway, there is no conflict here between φυσιολογία and prophecy, between natural causes and divine teleology¹¹. In other words: teleology does not prevent the world from having natural causes. Both are explanations in their own right.

b. *De defectu oraculorum* 435E-436A:

I shall defend myself by citing Plato as my witness and advocate in one. That philosopher found fault with Anaxagoras, the one of early times, because he

⁹ All translations are from *The Loeb Classical Library*.

¹⁰ See PH. A. STADTER 1989: 85.

¹¹ See D. BABUT 1969: 521.

was too much wrapped up in the physical causes and was always following up and pursuing the law of necessity as it was worked out in the behaviour of bodies and left out of account the purpose and the agent, which are better causes and principles. Plato himself was the first of the philosophers, or the one most prominently engaged in prosecuting investigations of both sorts, to assign to God, on the one hand, the origin of all things that are in keeping with reason, and on the other hand, not to divest matter of the causes necessary for whatever comes into being, but to realize that the perceptible universe, even when arranged in some such orderly way as this, is not pure and unalloyed, but that it takes its generation when matter comes into conjunction with reason.

In *De defectu oraculorum* there is outspoken criticism of Anaxagoras, not because of his quest for natural causes (φυσικαὶ αἰτίαι), but because of his one-sided interest in them and his neglect of what is explicitly called “better causes and principles” (βελτίονας αἰτίας ... καὶ ἀρχάς). The emphasis on the supremacy of those “better causes” can, again, be explained by the context: Lamprias is defending himself against the charge that, in his explanation of how the oracle works, he neglects them, and so he is eager to stress their importance!

The text hints at an element of what we would call “a scientific law”, namely a description of the operation of natural laws: in talking of the physical causes, Lamprias explains by describing them as “the law of necessity as it was worked out in the behaviour of bodies¹²” (τὸ κατ’ ἀνάγκην τοῖς τῶν σώματων ἀποτελούμενον πάθεισι – notice that in the Greek text there is no mention of any νόμος; there is no expression like ‘νόμος φυσικός’ in Plutarch’s writings) and “the causes necessary for whatever comes into being” (τῶν ἀναγκαίων πρὸς τὸ γιγνόμενον αἰτίων) in the material world (ὑλη). The “better causes”, on the other hand, are “the purpose and the agent” (τὸ οὗ ἔνεκα καὶ ὑφ’ οὗ); they concern “the origin of all things that are in keeping with reason” (τὴν ἀρχὴν ... τῶν κατὰ λόγον ἐχόντων) and god (τῷ ... θεῷ). Our visible world, then, the cosmos as we perceive it, exists as a mixture: matter to which reason is interwoven, and, as a mixture, is to be explained on the basis of natural causes together with the better causes: reason, providence, god. This means that the physical world is insufficiently *understood* by pointing to its natural causes alone: such an understanding (λόγος) through *explanation* of material causes is called ἐνδεῆς τοῦ προσήκοντος in 436E. One could maintain, then, that the autonomy of the physical world as a cosmos of physical causation is preserved, but that, for the sake of a proper understanding of the cosmos, it is complemented by a theory of teleological causation. One might even say that

¹² Later on (436E) Lamprias offers some examples: “clashes, transmutations and combinations” (πληγαῖς τε καὶ μεταβολαῖς καὶ κράσει).

divine and teleological causes, in that they are “higher and better”, supersede the natural causes. But there is no conflict between them.

There is a clear anti-Stoic tendency here: the younger generation (in opposition to the “very earliest theological writers and poets”) of so-called natural philosophers (436D), who do away with the “beautiful and divine origin”, are precisely the Stoics¹³. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that Plutarch, just like he did in the *Life of Pericles* but now more elaborately than in that *Life*¹⁴, illustrates the point by reference to artificial products (τὰ τεχνητά in *Per.* 6.5, ἐπὶ τῶν τεχνιτῶν in *De def. orac.* 436A sqq.). But in keeping with the theme of the dialogue, Lamprias in *De def. orac.* stresses the importance of the divine agent; to him the artist is compared and called ποιητής καὶ δημιουργός (436A-B). This is an expression elsewhere reserved for the god himself, who, in turn, receives the epitheton τεχνίτης (cf. supra).

c. The preponderance of the “higher, divine, better” principles implies the subordination of natural causes. This becomes explicitly clear in the *Life of Nicias*, §23¹⁵. Plutarch records that Anaxagoras was the first to offer a scientific explanation of the eclipses of the moon, but that in his days natural philosophers were distrusted “for that they reduced the divine agency down to irrational causes (αἰτίας ἀλόγους), blind forces (δυνάμεις ἀπρονοήτους) and necessary incidents (κατηναγκασμένα πάθη)”.

It was not until later times that the radiant repute of Plato, because of the life the man led, and because he subjected (ὑπέταξε) the compulsions of the physical world to divine and more sovereign principles, took away the obloquy of such doctrines as these, and gave their science free course among all men.

The whole paragraph can be regarded as a pendant for the passage in the *Life of Pericles*. There, the scientific explanation of Anaxagoras should have illustrated Pericles’ freedom from superstition thanks to Anaxagoras, whilst actually the story ends in a plea for the “higher” causes. Here it starts as a condemnation of Nicias’ superstition, but it actually ends in a license for the scientific explanation such as that of Anaxagoras. Except that Plutarch continues with an explanation of the lunar eclipse as an omen: he needs those two legs to stand on!

It has become clear by now that the physical processes we would nowadays describe in terms of “physical laws”, are to Plutarch’s mind (merely)

¹³ D. BABUT 1969: 313, n. 1.

¹⁴ In the *Life*, the meditation on causation embroiders on an illustrative anecdote; Plutarch himself calls himself to order, and refers that subject matter to “another piece of writing”. That may indeed be a reference to *De defectu oraculorum*: see PH. A. STADTER 1989: 87.

¹⁵ For a discussion of this passage, see J. HERSHBELL 1982: 142-143 and J. OPSOMER 1998: 182-183.

compulsively mechanistic, irrational and purposeless movements. Moreover, they are subordinated to the rational agency of a divine agent who provides for the purpose and true meaning of those movements.

On the one hand, one can understand why this divine causation is so important for Plutarch. Especially the upward, discursive train of thoughts in *De facie in orbe lunae* makes that clear. There is no better way to put it than H. Görgemanns¹⁶ did:

Für Plutarch ist das übergreifende Thema offenbar [...] die kosmische Theologie. Das “Wozu?” der so fremd und fern erscheinenden Himmelswelt bewegt ihm, und er versucht in verschiedener Weise, wissenschaftlich und mythisch, darauf zu antworten. Er folgt damit eine menschliche Bedürfnis nach Sinnggebung, das von der strengen Wissenschaft nicht befriedigt wird”; “Mechanistisches Funktionieren wird ausgeschlossen; statt dessen wird eine sinnvolle Ordnung durch einen göttlichen “Werkmeister” angenommen”.

And in that cosmos man has a destination. It is a destination that can fulfil his highest hopes and invest him with the peace of mind the essay *De tranquillitate animi* evokes. But, on the other hand, the question remains whether the scientific and the ‘mythic’ or ‘religious’ argument together explain the harmony of the cosmos without any hitch.

2.2. Creating cosmos

For an answer to the question how god managed to create the cosmos, we must turn to *On the face in the moon* again. 12-15 constitute a unit, in which Plutarch’s brother Lamprias modifies the Stoic doctrine of the local separation and stratification of the elements, according to which earth, water, air and fire have ‘natural’ motions and locations. Thus earth, being heavy, will naturally have a downward movement. Now Lamprias believes that the moon is of an earthy substance, and so he has to explain why this earthy substance is above and thus seems to have an ‘unnatural position’!

Lamprias refers to Empedocles’ cosmology, arguing that the cosmos came about providentially (ἐκ προνοίας) under the influence of φιλότης which compelled the four principles to “change positions and interchange functions”, so as to produce the concord and community of the universe (ἁρμονίαν καὶ κοινωनीαν τοῦ παντός).

§ 13 starts with a paradox:

If not a single one of the parts of the cosmos ever got in an ‘unnatural’ condition, ... , I cannot make out what use there is of providence (τῆς προνοίας) or of what

¹⁶ H. GÖRGEMANNS 1968: 10-11.

Zeus, 'the master-craftsman' is maker and father and creator"¹⁷ (τίνος γέγονε ποιητής καὶ πατήρ δημιουργός ὁ Ζεὺς ὁ ἀριστοτέχνας: 927A-B).

Lamprias juxtaposes Stoic πρόνοια and the Platonic¹⁸ ποιητής καὶ πατήρ δημιουργός, thus suggesting that a mere mechanical operation of natural forces, even if permeated by a Stoic providence, will not suffice to explain the cosmos, unless we accept the operation of a supreme power, an artist *par excellence*¹⁹.

Is it, then, the Empedeoclean²⁰ god's φιλότης that overcame the Stoic 'naturalness' of the elements? For surely there must be a tool, a procedure, a means to effectuate that. Lamprias' answer consists in a redefinition of what is 'natural': each particular part has its "natural position and motion and disposition" only "whenever it acts or is affected or disposed so that it contributes usefully and properly (χρησίμως καὶ οἰκείως) to the preservation or beauty or function" (927E) of that thing for the sake of which it has come to be. And this new teleological definition allows for the intervention of divine providence. But still, how did it operate? The answer is not explicitly in Plutarch, and thus, since Plutarch in all these matters is Plato's voice, it must be in Plato. And indeed, when discussing the nature of the cosmos containing the elements not as the effect of forcible expulsion (οὐκ ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἀποτεθλιμένοι) but arranged by reason (λόγῳ διακεκοσμένον), Lamprias concludes: "Nevertheless, in everything the better has control of the necessary" (928A). And that is Plato, *Ti.* 48a²¹:

For, in truth, this Cosmos in its origin was generated as a compound, from the combination of Necessity and Reason. And inasmuch as Reason was controlling Necessity by persuading her to conduct to the best end the most part of the things coming into existence, thus and thereby it came about, through Necessity yielding to intelligent persuasion (ἡττομένης ὑπὸ πειθοῦς ἔμφορος), that this Universe of ours was being in this wise constructed at the beginning.

¹⁷ H. GÖRGMANN 1970: 104, n. 47 is right in supposing that we need something like καὶ between πατήρ and δημιουργός. "Maker" and "father" clearly belong together as one group; these terms are discussed at length in *Plat. quaest.* II. In that *Quaestio*, the epithet ὑπατος (*De comm. not.* 1065E) appears as ἀνωτάτω (1000E). In *De facie* Lamprias is accumulating the epithets by means of the polysyndeton because this Zeus will need 'supernatural' powers in order to force the elements to leave their 'natural' positions and to take on 'unnatural ones' (like the earthy moon above us).

¹⁸ *Ti.* 28c: τὸν μὲν οὖν ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντὸς εὐρεῖν τε ἔργον καὶ εὐρόντα εἰς πάντας ἀδύνατον λέγειν.

¹⁹ L. VAN DER STOCKT 2002: 119.

²⁰ The answer cannot come from Anaxagoras, since he, regrettably, "did not really employ the concept of *Nous* in explaining the natural world, and thus in Plutarch's and Plato's eyes, he failed to provide teleological insights": J. HERSHBELL 1982: 146.

²¹ See H. CHERNISS 1968: 95, n. c.

The analogy between the politician and the divine agent may be complete by now. But to our modern mind it is inconceivable that a law of nature would change its operation, and actually dissolve itself, because it is “persuaded” by human or divine (prescriptive) speech. And this is where the hitch is: in Plutarch’s (Platonic) ‘intelligent design’, a divine agent ‘overcoming’ laws of nature by persuasion in order to create meaning.

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