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Joan Kung  
*Marquette University*

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# PLATO ON MIND AND MORALITY IN NATURE

by Joan Kung

The view that values and virtues, whether independently real or merely conventional, are no part of nature and are to be studied in a discipline distinct from sciences which investigate the natural world goes nearly unquestioned in our time. I shall argue that it is challenged by Plato in his criticism of Anaxagoras.<sup>1</sup> In the *Phaedo* (96aff.) Plato praises Anaxagoras for asserting that mind or intelligence (*nous*) orders and is responsible for everything, but he complains that Anaxagoras fails to explain how it is that specific things are best. According to one popular line of interpretation, the defect Plato sees in Anaxagoras' thought does not lie in his ontology, but in his failure to produce the proper sort of explanations of natural phenomena, explanations, moreover, to which his ontology could justly be expected to lend support. On this view Anaxagoras' major sin is one of omission. Plato is discontented because although Anaxagoras makes a promising beginning in the direction of teleological explanation, he then abandons that mode of explanation and merely describes the materials and mechanics of the natural world without ever providing the more important and valuable teleological accounts to explain why they are good.<sup>2</sup> If this interpretation were correct, one might hope to fix up Anaxagoras' faulty view by supplying the missing teleological explanations of natural phenomena, and although Socrates claims to be unable to offer them in the *Phaedo*, one might reasonably hope to find the omission corrected in Plato's own account of the origin and nature of the world in the *Timaeus*. Underlying this line of interpretation is the idea that there are different kinds or realms of explanation. Each is *sui generis* and complete in its own sphere, but not all are of equal importance or value. This interpretation takes for granted that the mechanics of the universe and the reasons it is ordered for the best can be known and described separately, or, at least, that the former can be described and explained independently of the latter. Some of my reasons for rejecting this interpretation will emerge in what follows.<sup>3</sup> I shall argue that Plato's position *vis a vis* Anaxagoras is better summarized as follows: One cannot understand and explain how nature works without making *nous* part of *psyche* and delineating the role of *psyche* as mover. In doing this, one will at the same time be understanding and explaining nature's goodness, including human virtue. This position emerges most clearly in the *Laws* and the *Timaeus*, so I shall begin with them, then return briefly to the *Phaedo* to consider whether similar views may also be discerned there.

In Book X of his late work the *Laws* Plato pits his spokesman, called the Athenian, against a group of opponents who hold a view of the world according to which nature is allied with chance and necessity, animate things (and hence the soul or *psyche* since it is that which distinguishes living from dead or inanimate creatures) are derivative products of the chance combination of materials,

and what is just and right does not exist at all by nature but is the result of mere convention. Plato plainly believes this “modernist” theory shares important features with the views of Anaxagoras (See *Laws* XII.967c.<sup>4</sup>). At the urging of his cohort Clinias, the Athenian agrees to try to expose the error of such a view. Clinias has earlier proposed a realignment of nature, not with chance and blind necessity but with art and intelligence and right and just things. However, the immediate response of the Athenian here is to put forward what seems to be a more limited argument. He says that the source of these thinkers’ unreasonable opinion is their taking “the first cause of the becoming and perishing of all things to be not first but generated later...” (891c). “All but a few men appear to be ignorant of the sort of being it is and what power it has...” (892a). If soul is primary and older than these bodies, fire, earth, air and water, it will be most eminently natural even on their conception of nature as “what was there first”, and what is “akin” to it (judgment, foresight, wisdom, art and law) will be the grand and primal works and deeds. Hard and soft, heavy and light will be derivative. The skeleton of the Athenian’s argument is: Some things are in motion and others at rest (893b); Only one type of motion moves itself as well as other things (894c); That type is first in coming to be and in power (*rhope*) (894d); When such motion arises in a thing composed of earth, air, fire and water, singly or in combination, it is alive (895c); When soul is such a thing, it is alive (895c); “The motion able to move itself” is the definition or account (*logos*) of the very same being that has “soul” as the name we universally apply to it (896a); Therefore, soul is the first genesis and motion, responsible (*aitia*) for all change and motion in all things (896a). The Athenian later also maintains that it must be rational souls which are in control of heaven and earth and the whole circle, for “Were the heavenly bodies without souls and by consequence without intelligence, they would never have conformed with such precision to calculations so marvelous” (967b)<sup>5</sup>. He then alludes again to the central mistake of the modernist theory and attributes it also to Anaxagoras:

And even in those days there were some who dared to hazard the statement that reason is the orderer of all that is in the heavens. But these same thinkers, through mistaking the nature of the soul and conceiving it to be posterior, instead of prior, to body, upset again (so to say) the whole universe, and most of all themselves; for as regards the visible objects of sight, all that moves in the heavens appeared to them to be full of stones, earth and many other soulless bodies which dispense the causes of the whole cosmos. (967b-c, cp. *Apology* 26d)

Plato evidently does not think that the movements characteristic of earth, stones and other bodies are such that one could account either for the origin of motion or for certain complex and orderly movements in terms of them. *Psyche* must be brought in, *psyche* of a special kind. F. Solmsen has pointed out to me that *nous*, and intellectual and cognitive functions generally, seem not to be an important part of *psyche* in Greek thought until Plato brings them together.<sup>6</sup> One of Plato’s reasons for doing so seems to be suggested here: order and regularity over a long period cannot be explained without mind and we cannot ac-



count for movement without *psyche*. Thus, that which is responsible for orderly movement must be a *psyche* that includes *nous*. Such a *psyche* must also be an independent entity not reducible to fire, earth, air or water nor to any compound, supervenient or derivative of them, with causal powers of its own and capable of interacting with these bodies. There is no separate, complete science of physics beside an independent science of psychology. Rather, physics can't be done without *psyche*.

Still we may feel that the Athenian has not done enough. In particular, he has been urged to show that wisdom and right are not merely conventional and has then given us an argument to show that the soul is required in physics as the source of motion. Why is he so confident that if self-moving motion is prior to bodies, then wisdom, justice, etc. will not be conventional? What do such things have to do with motion? One obvious answer would be that they are motions or that they somehow intimately involve or are related to motion. We may want to reject such an answer as utterly ridiculous. (I wonder whether this is partly because we falsely assume our concepts set the identity conditions for human virtues.) I suggest we consider it, for it seems clear that in the *Timaeus*, at least, Plato takes it seriously.

There are two broadly different ways in which soul functions in Plato's description of the cosmos that tie in with the passages in the *Laws* just mentioned. First, if the creation story is to be taken literally,<sup>7</sup> the cosmos is formed through the imposition of order by a divine, intelligent craftsman and world-soul with the help of subsidiary, divine souls. In this order the circular revolution caused by soul confines the heterogeneous elementary particles in a plenum, with the result that they also perpetually move one another with secondary, transmitted motion. Satisfying part of Clinias' demand in the *Laws*, nature is thus literally crafted, the work of art and intelligence, and *psyche* plays an essential role in its ongoing operations. *Psyche* also features prominently in the discussion of human structures, physiology and diseases to which Plato devotes a substantial portion of the *Timaeus*. In the course of this we begin to see what lies behind the Athenian's confidence.

The human being is organized along the same lines as the cosmos. The basic constituents of the universe and of a human organism are *psyche*, with its characteristic movements, and two sorts of right triangles. Out of the latter are constructed the traditional four elements: earth, particles of which are cubes, water (icosahedra), air (octahedra) and fire (tetrahedra). What we should now call the tissues and organs of the body are made of these particles mixed in different proportions. The marrow, made of the purest and finest triangles constitutes what we now see as the brain, spinal cord and bone marrow. The marrow is also the locale of *psyche*. Other parts are so arranged as to protect, support and nourish it and it is the material transmitted from parent to offspring in generation. Since the tissues and structures of the body are composed of the four elements in various proportions, the body is by its very nature liable to interact with them and is in a state of continual flux.<sup>8</sup> Health is a matter of maintaining the proper proportions and motions, a kind of homeostasis.

It is possible not only for the elements to be out of healthy proportion with one another but for one to be out of proportion with soul and for soul and body as a whole to be disproportionate. Indeed, for health or sickness, Plato says, "The proportion or disproportion between soul and body themselves is more important than any other" (87d), but he grumbles that insufficient heed is paid to this. A soul too strong for the body, by engaging in strenuous intellectual effort and controversy, causes violent shaking and wasting, resulting in dissolution<sup>9</sup> and bringing on inflammations and rheums (88a). Because ordinary physicians do not have the correct view of *psyche* and its role in the organism, they will misdiagnose this and some other diseases. Plato's view of *psyche* has implications for medical practice.

Plato also considers a group which he describes as diseases of the soul caused by the condition of the body:

The soul likewise derives much badness from the body. When acid and salt phlegms or bitter bilious humors roam about the body and finding no outlet are pent up within and fall into confusion by blending the vapor that arises from them with the motion of the soul, they induce all manner of disorders of the soul of greater or lesser intensity and extent. Making their way to the three seats of the soul, according to the regions they severally invade, they beget many diverse types of ill-temper and despondency, rashness, cowardice, forgetfulness and stupidity (*Timaeus* 86a-87a).

Folly (*anoia*), of which ignorance (*amathia*) is one variety, is also mentioned. There is good reason to believe Plato does not regard these examples as exhaustive, but we see already listed the names of some vices or evils commonly opposed to moral virtues. E.g. *amathia* is the vice opposed to wisdom, and cowardice (*deilia*) is opposed to courage or bravery in the *Protagoras*, the *Republic* and other dialogues. We may reasonably assume that cowardice has to do specifically with the spirited or affective part of the soul seated in the chest, and its behavioral symptoms suggest that acid and salt phlegms are primarily responsible for this disease. Making use of material from the *Philebus* (24aff.), which is probably alluded to in the phrase "of greater or lesser extent" above, earlier parts of the *Timaeus*, and other scattered remarks, it is possible to fill out in considerable detail the interactions of *psyche* and the elementary particles that constitute cowardice and several other diseases, although I have not the space to do it here.<sup>10</sup> The view that no one is voluntarily evil is reiterated and a brief "physiological" account of *akrasia* is given in the *Timaeus* (86b-e).

Plato offers advice in various dialogues on how to prevent and to treat such diseases. Proper nurture as well as the inheritance of a good constitution are important in prevention. His recommendations for the sort of education which will strengthen the mind and help to enable it to direct and to control the other parts of the human being are well known, although the view that control involves executing certain movements is less remarked. Such an education should include, where possible, a study of the circular movements underlying



the apparent paths of the self-moving aspect of *psyche* would seem to be particularly important for knowledge of the forms. I assume that Plato would not subscribe to a causal theory of knowledge, given the unchanging, eternal character of the forms. Nevertheless, knowing is an active process. It is by the initiation and continued execution of proper, circular movements that mind is able to rule. Not only mind but each part of the soul must be exercised regularly. In connection with courage he advises rocking the very young frequently to help overpower the internal motion of fear and taking a number of exercises, for without such measures “the youth will be especially liable to become fearful, and this, as all would assert, is not to practice courage but cowardice” (*Laws* 791b). He claims that “this factor — namely, the exercise of quite young children by the various motions — contributes greatly towards developing one part of the soul’s virtue” (*Laws* 791c).

For treatment of the diseases Plato again recommends education and study as well as gymnastics and proper diet. In keeping with the medicine of his time, he advises, “So far as leisure permits, one should manage and control all complaints by regimen, instead of irritating a stubborn mischief by drugs” (*Timaeus* 89d). He warns that misuse of drugs may aggravate or compound the difficulties in many diseases. E.g., he forbids wine as a *pharmakon* to rash youths, an age characterized by the medical writers as hot-moist, because it would add “fire to fire in body and soul” and aggravate their excited condition (*Laws* 666b). He thinks wine may be useful, however, in overcoming the despondency of old age, a cold-moist age.

This brief survey should be sufficient to show that Plato is viewing at least some moral vices as diseases and, by implication, moral virtue is part of health. One often encounters learned footnotes in translations of Plato warning that the Greek concept of *nosos* is broader than our modern notion. I should not presume to deny this in general, but I want to urge that what we are encountering with the use of *nosos* in these passages is not a different concept from ours but a disagreement over what things are to be counted as diseases. Some commentators have pointed out that Plato speaks in other dialogues of justice and some other virtues and vices as belonging to the soul. This is not inconsistent with my claim. The diseases of the soul and those involving disproportion of soul and body are listed in the *Timaeus* after diseases of the body which do not directly involve the soul, and there is no indication that they are categorically different. Saying cowardice is a disease of the soul is comparable to saying cirrhosis is a disease of the liver.

Plato’s treatment of the question “What is justice?” in the *Republic* also seems to accord with the view of virtue as health, providing this question is not understood as a conceptual question. That is, Plato is not asking, “What is the meaning of ‘justice’?” Nor is the object of inquiry an essence or universal whose identity conditions are set by the concept of justice in such a way that two non-synonymous concepts must be or refer to different entities. Plato’s attitude is instead comparable to that of the researcher who wants to know what cancer is. The aim is to discover what justice really is, regardless of whether it conforms to current conceptions, which may or may not even be true of it. Asked for

an account of justice in Plato's *Republic* (443d-e).<sup>12</sup> Justice is said to be that state of the *psyche* of a healthy organism in which reason rules with the backing of the spirited and desiring elements and each part does its own work (443d-e).

Plato is often said to be a dualist on the soul-body (or mind-body) problem. However, this is misleading and inaccurate if it suggests that he sees the life of the body and the life of the soul as proceeding in parallel, with each the subject of *sui generis* explanations. The immateriality of *psyche* is also emphasized. E.g. Arthur Adkins remarks. "Plato clearly held the *psuche* to be incorporeal... *psuche*, in his eyes, is immaterial; but it is surprising that he does not devote more time to making the point, a new and startling point in the Greece of his day."<sup>13</sup> On the view of soul which I am suggesting, this is perhaps not so surprising as it might otherwise be. The *psyche* is an entity a bit like force in Newtonian mechanics, in so far as it is something which, although immaterial, nevertheless causally affects and is affected by materials, interacts in specific ways with them and is required in order to give a causal explanation of certain natural phenomena, including human virtue and the origin and nature of movements. At the same time it is uniquely important and valuable in that part of it is capable of directing and ordering the other components of nature under proper conditions.

This view of *psyche* is closely related to Plato's view of the unity of science. The question "What is courage?" does not differ in principle from "What is fire?". There is one science of reality, in which the study of nature and goodness are inextricably intertwined. This becomes particularly evident in Plato's conception of virtue as health, since even in our day health seems irreducibly normative but at the same time factual. The researcher trying to discover what constitutes healthy organisms is not asking what their average state is but what the best one is, and he takes himself to be investigating something real and objective. He does not suppose that health is a matter of convention nor is it utterly unrelated to nature or empirical fact.

Does the account I have sketched, which is largely based on later dialogues, encompass a reaction to Anaxagoras altogether different from the complaints of the *Phaedo*? I suggest it does not, though there is not space for a detailed defense. Plato says that Anaxagoras was exactly like a man who, after saying Socrates acted by intelligence, should go on to maintain that he was sitting in prison because he had muscles, bones, joints, etc. which made it possible for him to do so, while omitting to mention the true cause which was that he thought it right to abide by the judgment of the Athenian people. G.E.R. Lloyd and others have remarked that the bones and muscles are here portrayed as necessary conditions or accessory causes. If so, they do not figure in categorially different explanations, although we have two different sorts of entities, some concrete and some immaterial. Plato also remarks that the same mistake is made by those who "never think of looking for a power which is involved in [the elements] being disposed as it is best for them to be... they never think that it is the binding force of good which binds (*sundein*) and holds things together" (99c). The term *sundein* and its cognates reappear in the *Timaeus*, when the god

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binds together the body of the world in the best geometrical proportions, also described as bonds (31c-32c). I suggest that what we are encountering in the *Phaedo* is not a (philosophically suspect) anticipation of the separation of a *priori* questions about moral values from questions to be dealt with in a distinct science of nature, but instead Plato's growing realization that the explanation of reality cannot be accomplished with the limited resources supplied by Anaxagoras. It will require us to posit as well the existence of very different sorts of entities involved in other relations and processes. Among other things an Anaxagorean position will lead to an attempted separation of facts and values which cannot be achieved and would not be acceptable. This represents a continuing theme in his criticism of Anaxagoras. Unless intelligence and right are "natural or more real than nature" (*Laws* 89od) and actively present in ways undelineated by him in the processes of the world, they will go by the wayside, and we shall be left with inadequate science and merely conventional morality.

Marquette University



- <sup>1</sup>Brentlinger and Furley have recently made interesting suggestions about possible Anaxagorean stimuli for Plato's theory of forms as well. See John Brentlinger, "Incomplete Predicates and the Two-World Theory of the *Phaedo*," *Phronesis* 17 (1972), 61-79, and David J. Furley, "Anaxagoras in Response to Parmenides," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supp. Vol. 2 (1976), 80-83.
- <sup>2</sup>Simplicius is one of the first to adopt such an interpretation in his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* (177.9). It often underlies the claim that Plato saw the physiologists as "mere mechanists". It would be risky to assume that Plato thought that Anaxagoras himself did not believe *nous* ordered the world for the best. Anaxagoras' famous formula reads *panta diekosmese nous* (DK B 12), and in reporting his views Plato repeatedly echoes the verb *diakosmeo* and its cognates. Von Fritz has noted that this alone suggests the order was thought to be purposeful. See "Der Nous des Anaxagoras," *Grundprobleme des Geschichte der antiken Wissenschaft* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971), p. 579n. and *passim*. The word *kosmos* is used for moral order and what is morally proper before it is applied to the physical universe, and it retains those overtones in earlier pre-Socratics. See Charles H. Kahn, *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 219ff. and Gregory Vlastos, "Equality and Justice in Early Greek Cosmologies," *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy* I, ed. D. Furley and R.E. Allen. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 56-91. See also Plato, *Cratylus* 413c and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 984b20-22; 988a8-16, b6-16; 1091b9-14.
- <sup>3</sup>An additional reason is that it is unlikely that the Greeks had a conception of universal, mechanistic determinism at the time of Anaxagoras, an insight I owe to Ian Mueller. See my forthcoming review of *Magic, Reason and Experience* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979), by G.E.R. Lloyd, *Nature and System*.
- <sup>4</sup>W. de Mahieu carefully discusses the origins and content of this theory in "La doctrine des Athees au X livre des Lois de Platon," *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 41 (1963), 5-24, 42 (1964), 16-47.
- <sup>5</sup>This may be a reference to the work of Eudoxus, but see also J.B. Skemp, *The Theory of Motion in Plato's Later Dialogues* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1942).
- <sup>6</sup>For an opposing view of Heraclitus, see C.H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 106f., 127. Some might also disagree about the Pythagoreans or Democritus.
- <sup>7</sup>The issue is controversial. Aristotle understood it literally, but Xenocrates did not. See G. Vlastos, "Creation in the *Timaeus*: Is It a Fiction?" *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics*, ed. R.E. Allen (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), pp. 401-419.
- <sup>8</sup>See H.W. Miller, "The Flux of the Body in Plato's *Timaeus*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 88 (1957), 103-113.
- <sup>9</sup>In his invaluable commentary on the *Timaeus* A.E. Taylor wants to emend *luei* to *saleuei* with no mss. authority. However, reflection on the physics underlying this disease reveals that *luei* is the right word to describe the action of the fire particles as the disease progresses.
- <sup>10</sup>Theodore Tracy makes a number of helpful remarks in this regard, although I suspect he would not accept my view of moral vice as disease. See his *Physiological Theory and the Doctrine of the Mean in Plato and Aristotle* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1969), ch. III.

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- <sup>11</sup>See Terrence Penner, "The Unity of Virtue," *Philosophical Review* 82 (1973), 35-68.
- <sup>12</sup>A.J.P. Kenny claims that "the hypothetical definition of justice as psychic health" would "no doubt" be replaced by a better definition by one more advanced in his education in "Mental Health in Plato's *Republic*," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 55 (1969), 248. However, what is first advanced as an hypothesis is not precluded from being correct. Kenny thinks Plato's moral concepts could not and should not be medical notions (pp. 249-253).
- <sup>13</sup>A.W. Adkins, *From the Many to the One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 130nl.

