
Plato's Cosmology and its Ethical Dimensions by Gabriela Roxanna Carone

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Reviewed by
Donald J. Zeyl
University of Rhode Island
djzeyl@uri.edu

The thesis of this provocative book is that the cosmological doctrines of the late dialogues are immensely relevant to the development of Plato's ethical views. The universe at large is a divine rational and teleological agent that serves as a model for emulation, and it is through their emulation of it that humans may become virtuous and happy. As a model, the universe is available to all humans, and so Platonic happiness is no longer confined to the philosophically educated or those under the rule of philosophers—all humans are citizens of the cosmos and capable in various degrees of understanding its order and purposes, and so the ethics of Plato's late period is truly cosmopolitan.

After a helpful introductory chapter, Carone devotes two chapters each to the *Timaeus*, *Philebus*, and *Politicus*. In the first of the doublet chapters, she presents an account of the dialogue's cosmology; and in the second, she works out the implications of that cosmology for human moral progress. There is one chapter on the *Laws*, and a final chapter summarizes the book and reflects on the implications of its argument.

As Carone notes in her introductory chapter, studies of Plato's ethics and of his cosmology have proceeded almost entirely independently of each other.¹ One of the consequences of the failure to connect the two is that students of Plato's philosophy have not been in a position to fully appreciate Plato's place in the history of ethics:

¹ An important recent exception is Johansen 2004, which appeared too late to be considered fully in Carone's book, but whose relevance she underrates [197n4].

not only for post-Platonic Greek philosophers but indeed for Plato himself nature is normative for human aspirations and conduct. The familiar Platonic ideal of ‘assimilation to god’ has traditionally been construed as requiring a divine reality *beyond* nature as the source of ethical normativity; by contrast, it is one of Carone’s central aims to ‘naturalize’ god. If god can be shown to be a rational entity or principle immanent in the cosmos, then Plato’s late ethics may clearly be viewed as a precursor of ethical systems like that of the Stoics.

The story Carone tells of the cosmology and its ethical relevance is complex, and no summary of it will do justice to its scholarly depth. This review will commence in the case of each dialogue with a brief account of its cosmology as Carone interprets it, followed by a summation of its ethical relevance.

The creation myth of the *Timaeus* [ch. 2–3] shows the universe to be the effect of a primary cause, the rational and purposive Demiurge. The Demiurge represents Intellect (νοῦς) but should not be understood to represent a transcendent deity, a divine soulless—even bodiless—entity. Carone argues (see further below) that the Demiurge is nothing other than the world soul, an intellect that is embodied in the universe. According to this understanding of the cosmology, the world soul is the purposive and beneficent mind that orders the entire universe. As an intelligent rational agent, the universe itself, under the aspect of its divine world soul, is a model for humans to emulate. Just as its reason overcame (or better: overcomes) the erratic impulses of necessity and harnesses those impulses to serve its rational purposes, so humans may look to the god that is the universe as a model to overcome the irrational disturbances in their own lives. The study of astronomy draws the motions of our own souls into conformity with the orderly motions of the universe, rendering us virtuous and happy. This happiness is not the exclusive preserve of philosophers who know the Forms, but is available to everyone under heaven. In this way the ethical elitism of the middle dialogues gives way to a universal inclusiveness.

That inclusiveness also characterizes the attainment of the best life, the competition for which—between knowledge and pleasure—constitutes the main topic of the *Philebus*, a work discussed in chapters 3 and 4. In that dialogue also, according to Carone, cosmology

provides a model for human moral success. The discursively presented *Philebus* cosmology complements that of the mythically related *Timaeus*: the ἄπειρον of the former corresponds to the ἀνάγκη of the latter, πέρας to the function of the Forms in giving formal/mathematical determination to the undetermined, the mixture of the two to the ordered realities that result from the determination, and mind (as cause of the mixture) to the Demiurge understood as the world soul. Mind in the *Philebus* is (like the Demiurge on Carone's reading) immanent in the cosmos. So here again, the universe itself as macrocosm is an embodied teleological agent, ready to serve as a model for microcosmic rational human agents. This cosmology, Carone argues, is deeply relevant to the dialogue's ethical discussion of pleasure and its claim to a constitutive place in the best life. For, whereas the various kinds of 'false' pleasures are exhibits of ἄπειρον, the 'pure' pleasures—as well as some of the mixed pleasures—have proportion and thus are associated with πέρας. These pleasures have a rightful claim to be in part constitutive of the good life. How, it may be asked, does this provide space for the modeling function of the divine universe? Carone argues provocatively [114–115] that pleasure is in fact a valuable component of the life of god. It goes without saying that knowledge is such a component as well, and that humans find happiness in emulating the divine reason of the universe by understanding its mathematical proportions, which draw them to goodness in their choices of pleasures. As microcosmic derivatives of the macrocosmic universe, they may reflect its rational and teleological life (provided that they overcome the effects of the ἄπειρον). Such understanding leads humans to self-knowledge. So again, happiness is available not just to the philosophically educated or the citizens of a philosophically ruled community, but to all citizens of the cosmos.

Carone finds cosmological relevance in the myth of the reversals of the cosmic periods propounded at *Politicus* 269e–274e, the subject of chapters 6 and 7. According to the traditional (though lately much disputed) reading of that myth, the cycle of our present age—in contrast to the earlier age of Cronus—is devoid of divine guidance. If this reading were to stand, the myth would contradict the divinized cosmologies of the *Timaeus* and the *Philebus*; and Carone argues persuasively that the traditional reading fails. This age is after all the age of Zeus and is as such under divine guidance; it is separated from the prior age of Cronus by an interval during which the world, bereft

of divine guidance, reversed its course and tended to descend toward utter chaos, from which the divinity represented by Zeus, reestablishing its original course, rescued it. Even so, there are crucially significant differences between these two divinely guided ages, and these differences are relevant to the political theme of the dialogue. Unlike the subjects under the direct and benevolent care of Cronus, we humans in the less than ideal age of Zeus contend with the lingering effects of the universe's chaotic past. In the absence of regional deities to guide us, we are on our own and must exercise greater autonomy. Among the crafts that we require to make do for ourselves is the political craft, and thus the need to be ruled by a wise ruler whose model is the cosmic god. Carone argues that while the mythic reversal of cosmic cycles should not be taken literally, the account places humans in a universe in which a drama between intelligent order and chaos is being played out. This drama recalls the opposition of rationality and necessity in the *Timaeus* and the tension between *πέρας* and *ἄπειρον* in the *Philebus*. While the rules of Cronus and Zeus are thus substantially different, they are both in different ways expressions of a single divine intellect that in the *Politicus*, as in the *Timaeus* and *Philebus*, serves as a model available to all humans to emulate.

Laws X (discussed in chapter 8) raises the 'problem of evil' in the context of the divine governance of the world. The ruling world soul (which according to Carone is not independent of its cosmic body) is divine and, hence, not responsible for evil in the world. Nor is there a rival cosmic 'evil soul'; evil in the cosmos is caused by the bad condition of self-determining human souls: humans are entirely responsible for all evil in the cosmos—not only moral evil but (surprisingly) natural evil as well. For humans are an integral part of an organically unified universe—in fact, in a limited sense, they are 'rulers' of it—and human decisions and actions have consequences that reverberate throughout the cosmos. Thus, evil in the human soul in the form of folly, injustice, arrogance, all rooted in greed (*πλεονεξία*), must be overcome if our co-rule of the universe under the rational rule of the divine world soul is to be in harmony with its purposes.

En route to establishing her main thesis, Carone visits many issues in the interpretation of these dialogues that have been and remain areas of scholarly controversy. The positions she defends on

those issues are often original, but her defense of them is not always cogent. Many scholars who read this book will be provoked by her arguments. In this review, I propose to take issue with her claim that in the *Timaeus* (at least) god is immanent, and that the Demiurge in that dialogue must be identified with the rational world soul.

The question of the ontological status of the Demiurge, the anthropomorphically represented god that is the primary, intelligent, and beneficent efficient cause of the visible universe is one of long-standing in the interpretation of the *Timaeus*. Given the apparently exhaustive ontological division between ‘what is’ and ‘what becomes’, what sort of entity is this god? Carone argues that it may and should be identified with the world soul, embodied in (material) space. Her argument appears to be the following:

1. The Demiurge ‘is or performs the function of a mind or *nous*’ [42: see 35–42].
2. There can be no motion without soul [43, with textual references there].
3. Mind is in (rotary) motion [44].
4. Therefore, soul is prior to mind and the mind that is (or is represented by) the Demiurge is ensouled.
5. ‘Motion presupposes space’ [44].
6. ‘Space implies body, since there is no void in Plato’s universe’ [45].
7. Therefore, ‘a spatial or material medium seems to be a necessary condition for the motion of [the demiurgic] *nous* itself’ [45].
8. Therefore, the Demiurge just is the world soul.²

This argument is directed against those who see the Demiurge as representing a transcendent god—transcending, that is, the whole realm of becoming (of which the world soul is a part).

This argument is open to challenge. Critics will charge that it conflates producing agent with product. The world soul is undeniably itself an artifact, a product of whatever mind it is that the Demiurge is or represents (*Timaeus* 35a–36d). Metaphor or not, the creation story of the *Timaeus* would be rendered grossly incoherent if this

² Strictly, the conclusion is that the Demiurge is the mind of the world soul, but since this soul—unlike the souls of humans—has no other parts, there is no conceptual space to distinguish the mind of the world soul from the world soul as such.

interpretation of the status of the Demiurge were to stand. But it does not stand. For, while (rotary) motion is indeed an attribute of the (mind of the) world soul—in the *Timaeus*, the rotary motion of the Circle of the Same around its polar axis—there is no evidence that this motion is an essential attribute of mind *per se*. Contexts in the *Timaeus* and elsewhere that describe mind as engaged in such motion can easily be read as referring to instances of mind embodied in the cosmos. Carone's contention that 'Plato's claims about the nature of intellect in the *Timaeus* concern intellect as such, that is, as a genus of which both human and divine intellect are kinds' is only partly borne out. For according to the *Timaeus*, divine intellect itself is of two kinds: there is the generating intellect represented by the Demiurge, and the generated intellect of the world soul distributed among heavenly bodies, the generated 'gods' to whom is assigned the task of generating mortal creatures (*Timaeus* 41a–d). Texts in the *Timaeus* and elsewhere that ascribe rotation to mind may easily be read as referring to this generated cosmic mind, not necessarily to mind *per se*. So premiss 3 above calls for qualification and once qualified is compatible with the existence of a transcendent mind, which neither rotates nor, for all we know, is ensouled.³

It is regrettable that Carone devotes such zeal to attempting to prove that the divine mind of Plato's cosmology must be immanent. For as long as there is a type of divine mind that is indeed the immanent organizing mind of the universe, ordering it in the pursuit of attaining good ends (and we have seen that the cosmic soul, personified by the generated gods, does indeed play such a role), the function of the universe as model for human beings who are exhorted to imitate the divine remains intact. Such imitation of the universe

³ The statement at 30b that 'it is impossible for mind to come to be present (*παραγενέσθαι*) in anything apart from soul' has often been taken (as now also by Carone, [44]) to mean that mind *in general* cannot exist apart from soul. But it has long ago been pointed out (by Hackforth and others) that the choice of infinitive shows clearly that the context of application is *γένεσις*, i.e., the world of becoming. To that extent, it is true that the divine cosmic mind, itself a thing that has come to be (*γγόμενον*), must be ensouled (this is exactly the context in which the statement occurs). But that requirement does not necessarily apply to a transcendent divine mind, should there be any such.

is indeed the imitation of god—albeit a lesser god—and the characterization of late Plato as an ethical naturalist is not ruled out by this challenge to Carone’s claims about the status of the Demiurge.

Other controversial claims include the contention that in the dialogues discussed Plato gives up his earlier belief—if he ever held it—that soul is essentially independent of body. It sometimes seems that Carone is guided more by her own philosophical predilections than by a careful assessment of all the evidence. Nevertheless, she has succeeded in establishing her overall thesis: that there is an inextricable connection between Plato’s cosmology and his late ethics, and that it is only by modeling our own microcosmic natures and lives upon the larger, macrocosmic nature and life of the universe that we humans will find our own teleological fulfillment. To that extent, we are undeniably in her debt.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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