

## NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

### THE FORMATION OF THE COSMOS IN THE *STATESMAN* MYTH

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THERE IS A CLASSICAL DEBATE in Platonic scholarship over whether, on the one hand, the temporal order of events in Plato's descriptions of the divine formation of the universe is to be read literally, and we are to take it that Plato believes that there was indeed a period in which the Demiurge had not intervened into chaos and had not created the World-Soul and other souls, or whether, on the other hand, these events are to be read analytically as being described solely for the sake of exposition, and we are to take it that chaos simply represents a constitutive factor within a world which always has been ordered and under the guidance of souls. This debate goes back to the first generation of Plato scholars within the Academy. Among modern critics, Cherniss has marshalled the arguments, many gleaned from Proclus, in favour of a non-literal reading of Plato's descriptions of the creation of the cosmos by the ordering of chaos<sup>1</sup> and Vlastos has marshalled the arguments in favour of a literal reading.<sup>2</sup>

The debate over literal versus non-literal interpretations of the creation act has largely been limited to the *Timaeus*. I wish to suggest that the largely neglected *Statesman* myth offers some support to literal interpretations of the creation act. As in the *Timaeus*, Plato in the *Statesman* myth at least *speaks* as though there was a definite creation act, so that the burden of proof rests on a critic who denies that Plato *means* that there was such an act.<sup>3</sup>

Now the Demiurge is said to endow the world with reason κατ' ἀρχάς, "in the beginning" (269d 2; cf. *Timaeus* 48a 5). Moreover, the language

<sup>1</sup>H. F. Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy* 1 (Baltimore 1944) 421-431.

<sup>2</sup>Gregory Vlastos, "Creation in the *Timaeus*: Is it a Fiction?" in R. E. Allen, ed., *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics* (London 1965) 401-419. This article has been attacked and Cherniss' views defended by Leonardo Tarán, "The Creation Myth in Plato's *Timaeus*" in J. P. Anton and G. L. Kustas, eds, *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Albany, N.Y. 1971) 372-407.

<sup>3</sup>Most non-literalist readings of the *Timaeus* seek to discharge the obligation by pointing out (alleged) doctrinal inconsistencies which are supposed to flow from the assumption of a creation act (see Vlastos, *op. cit.* 405-406).

of 273b-d suggests a certain primeval state of chaos before there was any ordering of the universe by the Demiurge (esp. b 4-5, 6, c 7-d 1).<sup>4</sup> Cherniss wishes to claim that these indications of an initial creation act in the *Statesman*, as in the *Timaeus*, express "in the synthetic form of a cosmogony what is in fact an analysis of the constitutive factors of the universe."<sup>5</sup> Of the *Statesman* myth in particular, Cherniss writes: "In the *Politicus* . . . the precosmical disorder and the retrograde motion [are] mythical, i.e., factors of the actual phenomenal world isolated for the purpose of description."<sup>6</sup> But here Cherniss too quickly lumps together the initial pre-cosmic period of the *Statesman* myth with the many later retrograde cycles of the universe which are described in the myth. In the *Statesman* myth, though not in the *Timaeus*, the temporal isolation of separate cosmic periods, representing for non-literalists constitutive factors of the universe, is not poetically or mythically achieved by a unique creation act. Rather this separation is achieved by the periodic alternation of cosmic cycles. This alternation, however, need never have had a beginning. That the alternations are said to have a beginning is a fact over and above the bare existence of the alternations. The strong suggestion of an initial creation act in the *Statesman* myth, therefore, is not easily explained away by the same reasoning that is used to explain it away in the *Timaeus*, since in the *Statesman* myth the "synthetic form" which on a non-literal reading would express an analysis of the constitutive factors of the universe is sufficiently accounted for by the description of the alternations of cosmic cycles, and this description is independent of the description of the pre-cosmic period and the initial creation act. Therefore, though the initial creation act may not differ in kind from later demiurgic interventions in the *Statesman* myth, it is surprising that it should be mentioned at all, if it is not meant to be taken at face value. Taken as merely a literary device the description of the initial creation act in the *Statesman* is redundant and represents a literary excess uncharacteristic of the myth (see esp. 269c 5-270a 8).

This redundancy has two unfortunate consequences for non-literalists. First, if the description of the initial creation act is not merely a literary device and yet for non-literalists has to be explained away as *meaning* just the opposite of what it *says*, then it looks very much as if Plato on a non-literalist account is intentionally misleading the reader.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, if the initial creation act in the *Statesman* is not to be reduced to a mere

<sup>4</sup>See J. B. Skemp, *Plato's Statesman* (London 1952) 106.

<sup>5</sup>Cherniss, "The Sources of Evil According to Plato," *Proc. Am. Phil. Soc.* 98 (1954), reprinted in G. Vlastos, ed., *Plato 2* (Garden City, N.Y. 1971) 247.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, n. 21.

<sup>7</sup>See Vlastos (above, note 2) 405.

poetic device, then any attempt to explain away its literal sense by special pleading, though not impossible, would be inappropriate.

It seems then that the presence in the *Statesman* both of the periodic alternation of cosmic cycles *and* of a pre-cosmic period with creation κατ' ἀρχάς makes a non-literal reading of the creation act *pro tanto* harder for the *Statesman* than for the *Timaeus*.

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