

# Polis and Cosmos

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There are aspects of our human experience that always have deep symbolic roots and which shape our way of life even if we do not notice. One such aspect is the symbolic relation between our conception of the universe and our conception of human society. There is always in any culture a correspondence between the vision of the cosmos and its order, and the vision of society and its order. We are living at a time when this is not generally acknowledged, and so it has become invisible. To many it would seem quite strange to suggest that our contemporary conception of the universe has any political or social implications. In part this is because it is assumed that our scientific knowledge of the universe disposes of any symbolic understanding of it. And likewise with the scientific approaches to the study of society, especially those that are strongly mathematical and statistical. There would seem to be no scope for any symbolic understanding of this kind of knowledge. However, I wish to suggest that our modern empirical approach to understanding the universe and society has behind it deep symbolic roots, and that how we now conceive human society and civilisation is deeply connected with our conception of the universe.

There are reasons why most people would find this difficult to accept, but these I shall come to later. To understand our present vision of society and the cosmos we need to go back to a time when the symbolic relations between different orders of reality were part of the general outlook of the culture. This we find in the ancient creation myths from all parts of the world. The first impulse to 'story telling' is to say how all things came to be. Despite the infinite variety of creation myths, they all say 'it came to pass that the world and human beings came into being in this way'. It may be that God spoke and

all things began. Or it may be that the world hatched from a primordial egg. Or it may be that man sprang out of a peapod. Or it may even be that some evil demiurge created the world in order to imprison immortal souls in darkness and ignorance. These mythic narratives all serve the purpose of situating our human existence in the cosmic order. They are not meant to be understood literally. They are consciously metaphorical and even magical, and this is because they express the mystery of the beginning of things, not with a view to explaining how things came to be, but rather to express our awe and wonder that existence has come about. This wonder and awe is the wellspring of piety and religion, and of philosophy and the arts. Piety, religion, philosophy and art are our response to finding the world has come into being. The world makes us open our eyes and calls for us to make a reply in word and deed. How we live is our reply, both individually and as society.

It is really important to see that these myths are not intended to give an explanation of the world, but rather provoke a response. In a sense they are already a response because they marvel at the coming to be of the world, and they bring us to stand before all that is, like Adam brought by God before the beasts and the herbs of the field to name them. And in naming the animals and growing things of the earth Adam commits to a way of life with them – because naming is also making a bond. There is a sacramental element in naming, and that is why it can also be impious or blasphemous. The manner in which we speak of things shapes our souls.

I suggested that this mythical apprehension of things, which finds expression in the mythical canon of a culture, is the wellspring of religion and philosophy. These two modes of response to the coming to be of the cosmos take their own distinctive forms and adopt their own distinctive kinds of language. The religious manifestation takes the form of theology, where the symbols of the divine are retained, and where a conscious vocabulary of divine metaphors remain in use. And so God is a ‘person’, and the divine nature a trinity of persons. This theological language not only speaks of the

divine realm and source of things, it also addresses it and speaks the language of prayer. The philosophical manifestation takes the form of metaphysics, where the intellectual language of abstraction is born. So rather than speak of the Father, as the theologian does, the philosopher speaks of the One or the Good or the True or the Absolute. These two modes of response and understanding have a very complex historical relationship with each other. They flourish when both discourses exist together in a society. They decline when divorced from each other. In truly remarkable thinkers, such as Plato, we see how in the dialogues he moves from one to the other, though never confusing them. The same may be said of Thomas Aquinas.

Nevertheless, both modes of understanding seek to discern the relationship of the human realm and the cosmic order. For the ancients human society maintains its own nature through being brought into accord with the heavenly order. For Plato there is a correspondence between the cosmos, the city, and the citizen. The city, the natural human dwelling place, governed by speech, is a small cosmos after the pattern of the great cosmos, and the individual citizen is a small city after the pattern of the great city. For Plato this means that the polis takes form through a combination of correspondences between the divine cosmic order and the order of the soul. In one sense the polis is a *microcosmos*, and in another sense it is a *macroanthropos*, the soul writ large.<sup>1</sup> The polis flourishes in peace when its laws spring from and embody this threefold harmony. Then the citizens love the laws, and education and the arts nurture the natural order of the soul. The opposite condition is where the city splits into factions and is at war with itself, and where chaos threatens to overthrow the natural order.

Plato's endless enquiry into politics – the question of virtuous citizenship – seeks to understand the connections between the order of the whole universe and the human city and the human soul. These three need to be thought

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<sup>1</sup> See Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, (University of Chicago Press, 1987) p. 61 for a full discussion of this in Plato's conception of the polis.

about together. It is often said that Plato is the father of political enquiry, yet it is clear that this correlation between the cosmos, the city and the soul was present in ancient Egyptian ethics. In her study of Egyptian Maat, Maulana Karenga, writes:

Assman (LA IV, 974) has noted concerning the person in Kemetic society that “As an individual man is not viable (*lebenfähig*): he lives in and through society.” This essentially means that the Maatian community is a communitarian and participatory moral community. Here always the person-in-relationship, i.e., in family, community, society, is the centre of focus as distinct from modern European individualism, in which the individual, abstract, autonomous and often alienated, is the essential focus and center of gravity. In Maatian ethics the sociality of selfhood is defined by roles and relationships and the practice attached to these roles. Self-development becomes a communal act, an act rooted in activity for and of the community. One, then, is not an individual, autonomous and alone, but a person interrelated and encumbered by the relations and demands of one’s society.<sup>2</sup>

Maulana further remarks that “the Maatian society was not simply a human construction, but also a participant in the divine and cosmic ideal and practice of Maat”.<sup>3</sup> Again “humans are embedded in this order with its divine, social and natural aspects. *In their identity as children and images of God, humans belong to the divine; in their identity as social beings, they belong to society; and in their identity as living beings they belong to nature*”.<sup>4</sup>

Similar threefold divisions of participation resonate in Plato and into Stoicism and the Christian natural law tradition. The ethical dimension of life

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<sup>2</sup> Maulana Karenga, *Maat, The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics* (Routledge, London, 2004), p. 257.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 258.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 381.

is manifest on all levels, from the divine cosmic order down to the laws of nature, and the human city embodies all aspects. The work of philosophy and theology is to articulate 'the whole' to which human life belongs if it is to flourish. For while everyone has a sense of the whole, without reflection it remains indistinct.

Connected with the sense of the whole is the question of the hierarchical nature of the cosmic order. The threefold division of divine, social, and natural in Maat ethics is a clear hierarchy, descending from highest to lowest. It is a sacred order, which is what the word 'hierarchy' means. For Plato an acknowledgement of the hierarchical order of the cosmos is essential for understanding human society and for law-making. One of the great dangers for the polis is that the cosmic hierarchy should be inverted, placing the least ordered and intelligent first in the order of things coming into being, and the highest intelligence and knowledge as last in coming into being. To adopt such a view is at once arrogant and impious. In Plato's last dialogue, the *Laws*, Plato portrays an imaginary youth who expresses such a view, and he imagines what might be said to such a youth:

Let us say to the youth: The ruler of the universe has ordered all things with a view to the excellence and preservation of the whole, and each part, as far as may be, has an action and passion appropriate to it. Over these, down to the least fraction of them, ministers have been appointed to preside, who have wrought out their perfection with infinitesimal exactness. And one of these portions of the universe is thine own, unhappy man, which, however little, contributes to the whole; and you do not seem to be aware that this and every other creation is for the sake of the whole, and in order that the life of the whole may be blessed; and that you are created for the sake of the whole, and not the whole for the sake of you. For every physician and every skilled artist does all things for the sake of the whole, directing his effort towards the common good, executing the part for the sake of

the whole, and not the whole for the sake of the part. And you are annoyed because you are ignorant how what is best for you happens to you and to the universe, as far as the laws of the common creation admit.<sup>5</sup>

The impiety of this imaginary youth lies in him supposing he is the centre of existence, and that the universe exists for his sake, and not him for the sake of the good of the whole. For the ancient philosophers such an introverted view of things is the root of all ignorance. From such a position there cannot be any real enquiry into the nature of things, or into the true nature of society. Plato suggests that there are several false positions that can arise from this false conception of the hierarchical whole. The first is that the gods do not exist. The second is that the gods came into being later in the emergence of things from unintelligent elements. The third is that the gods may be persuaded to act contrary to their wisdom and grant things to men unjustly. These three 'impious' beliefs preclude the proper investigation of the nature of the polis and the human soul. They alienate the human order from the divine order. This is because the rightly ordered polis reflects in its institutions and laws the greater order of the cosmos. But also the soul of the individual citizen cannot be harmonious with itself without being ordered harmoniously with the divine order of the heavens, as Plato shows in the *Timaeus*. This is because the motions of intelligence of the soul become properly ordered when attuned to the divine harmony of the heavens. This is the foundation of the theory that the mind grasps the truth of things through conforming itself to truth. Also, the harmonious order of the soul brings the rational, the spirited and the appetitive parts into their proper relations serving their proper ends. As for the individual, so for the city. The harmony of the city is maintained through honouring the highest things first, and the least things last. Thus Plat says in the *Laws*:

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<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Laws*, translated by B. Jowett, 903b.

We say, then, that the likelihood is that if a city is to be preserved and is to become happy within the limits of human power, it must necessarily apportion honours and dishonours correctly. The correct apportionment is one which honours most the good things pertaining to the soul (provided it has moderation), second, the beautiful and good things pertaining to the body, and, third, the things said to accrue from property and money. If some lawgiver or city steps outside this ranking either by promoting money to a position of honour or by raising one of the lesser things to a more honourable status, he will do a deed that is neither pious nor statesmanlike. (697b)

This ranking of honours applies to the individual soul and to the city. It is analogous to the threefold division of the soul Plato draws in the *Republic* of the rational, spirited, and appetitive. Owing to such analogical correspondences, Plato derives the hierarchical nature of the polis from the hierarchical nature of the soul, where the higher governs the lower. Thus Socrates says in the *Republic*:

In that case, my friend, if the individual too has these same elements in his soul, we shall feel entitled to expect that it is because these elements are in the same condition in him as they were in the city that he is properly titled by the same names we gave the city. (435b-c)<sup>6</sup>

The ranking of parts in the individual soul and in the polis does not imply inequality. It implies proportion and harmony between the different parts of the soul or different functions of the institutions of the polis. For example, when the things pertaining to the rational part of the soul are most honoured, this means that reason regulates the spirited part of the soul so that courage is measured and not foolhardy, or the appetitive part of the soul so that eating is healthful. In other words, reason acts in different ways in different parts of

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<sup>6</sup> Translation from G. R. F. Ferrari, *City and Soul in Plato's Republic* (The University of Chicago Press, 2005) p. 41

the soul, and likewise in the polis. It follows from this also that any ills that befall the polis from within are due to these proportions being disrupted.

This raises what for many is the most controversial aspect of Plato's correlation of the soul and the polis: that the laws of the city are intended to regulate both the institutions of the polis and the souls of its citizens. Plato assumes, contrary to modern politics, that there is a *natural* order of the city which it should strive to approximate. Aristotle assumes the same. Our age finds this assumption difficult because the city, and indeed civilisation, are considered to be artificial constructs and not part of nature. In considering the soul or society our age no longer acknowledges a correspondence between soul, polis, and cosmos. The true and final aim of law-making is friendship, as Plato says in the *Laws*: "When we asserted one should look toward moderation, or prudence, or friendship, these goals are not different but the same".<sup>7</sup> There is a remarkable passage in Plato's *Laws* which argues that only when the common good is sought is the political art practiced wisely:

For, in the first place, it is difficult to know that the true political art must care not for the private but for the common – for the common binds cities together, while the private tears them apart – and that it is in the interest of both the common and the private that the common, rather than the private be established nobly.<sup>8</sup>

In a way, it is only when citizens seek the common good that they are truly citizens.

The understanding that the polis is part of the greater order of nature passes on from Plato and Aristotle to the Stoics. The Stoics emphasise the cosmic aspect in particular, especially the understanding of the cosmos as intelligent

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<sup>7</sup> Plato, *The Laws of Plato*, translated by Thomas Pangle (Basic Books, New York, 1980), 693c

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *The Laws of Plato*, translated by Thomas Pangle (Basic Books, New York, 1980), 875a

and wise. Cicero, for example, records the philosophy of the Stoics in his *On the Nature of the Gods*, where he writes:

. . . One can also see that the cosmos contains intelligence from the fact that it is without doubt better than any other nature. Just as there is no part of our body which is not of less value than we ourselves are, so the cosmos as a whole must be of more value than any part of it. But if this is so, the cosmos must necessarily be wise, for if it were not, then human beings, who are part of the cosmos, would have to be of more value than the entire cosmos in virtue of participation in reason.<sup>9</sup>

As with Plato, the Stoics see the connection between the cosmos and the soul through the participating of both in reason. Reason, or intelligence, is the ordering principle of the cosmos and the soul, guiding everything to its proper end in relation to the perfection of the whole. From the correspondence, the Stoics speak of two cities, one the universe, the dwelling place of the gods, the other the human city. Insofar as human beings act wisely and virtuously, they dwell in both cities at once. Again, no one speaks of this more eloquently than Cicero:

. . . the universe is as it were a city consisting of gods and men, the gods exercising leadership, the men subordinate. Community exists between them because they partake of reason, which is natural law; and all else has come into being for their sake. In consequence of which it must be believed that the god who administers the whole exercises providence for men, being beneficent, kind, well-disposed to men, just and having all the virtues.<sup>10</sup>

This passage is interesting as it bridges the philosophical and the theological modes of understanding. To speak of the universe as providential and ‘just

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<sup>9</sup> *The Stoic Reader*, translated by B. Inwood and L Gerson (Hackett Publishing Company, 2008) p. 65

<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Schofield, *The Stoic Idea of the City* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999) p. 66.

and having all the virtues' is a theological mode of speech, and it enables a perception of the goodness of the cosmos. It means that the proper human life of dwelling in the cosmic and the human city is also 'just and having all the virtues'. The life of virtue is also the life in accord with 'natural law' – a concept that was to resonate through the Middle Ages and into jurisprudence and the English common law tradition. The natural law is the law that belongs to everything by nature and which inclines each created being towards its proper function and completion. It manifests in the human soul and in the community as the virtues, as in this Stoic description:

The goal of all these virtues is to live consistently with nature. Each one enables a human being to achieve this [goal] in his own way; for [a human] has from nature inclinations to discover what is appropriate and to stabilize his impulses and to stand firm and to distribute [fairly]. And each of the virtues does what is consonant [with these inclinations] and does its own job, thus enabling a human being to live consistently with nature.<sup>11</sup>

The approach to human life through the natural law and the virtues stands in strong contrast to the positivist ethics that emerged in the seventeenth century, which speaks of rights and rational principles of morality, which is an ethics operating from outside the soul. Natural law and the virtues understand ethics as arising from the natural order and inclinations of the soul, not as 'rules' to follow but as qualities of authentic being, as for example in 'courage' or 'prudence' or 'temperance'. These virtues arise from the harmony of the soul with itself and with the cosmos. The human being is *naturally good* when acting according to its true nature. Positivist ethics, on the other hand, assumes a conflict between human nature and right action. It is not a new position. It is an opinion strongly opposed by Plato in the sophists who held that virtuous action was useful only in public where it served one's advantage, while in private it could be discarded and one could

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<sup>11</sup> *The Stoic Reader*, p. 126.

follow any inclination or desire without fear of retribution from the gods. It is the core of the eighteenth century economic idea of 'enlightened self-interest'. I mention this contrast because the positivist ethics has no cosmic dimension. It does not situate the human person within 'the whole' of reality, even in a materialist sense, let alone in a divine sense. Because of this many of the cosmic symbols, both in religious and civic life, which articulated our relation with the cosmos are losing their meaning. The pantheon of the gods, the hierarchy of angels, the scales of justice, the sacred precinct, the harmony of the spheres, rites of passage – all these symbolic connections of the city with the heavens are losing their power and capacity to orient the soul towards the greater whole and greater good.

The correspondence between soul, polis and cosmos takes new form in the Christian tradition. St Augustine's *City of God* portrays human citizenship as dwelling in two cities, the earthly or temporal city and the heavenly or eternal city, resonating with the Stoic conception mentioned earlier. The eternal or heavenly city now becomes the Christian community, which is the membership of the body of Christ or the ecclesia. The two cities now bring a new distinction. The heavenly city is ruled by divine law, the earthly by human law. Although the earthly city in some sense reflects the divine law, that law cannot be fulfilled in the earthly city. Again, distinct from the Stoic city, the soul is called beyond the mortal life of this world to the eternal life of the divine world. This also means that for the Christian citizen there is an inner spiritual life, and an outer secular life. This turn inwards, which opens the way for the Christian mystical tradition, reconciles the Christian life with life in the Roman republic and the Roman pantheon.

We cannot go into it here, but we see in Augustine a great reconciliation between Greek philosophy, Roman Stoicism, Judaism, and the New Testament. The emergent mystical element is also to found in Neoplatonism, especially Plotinus. But while Plotinus and Neoplatonism generally maintains the metaphysical and intellectual mode of speech and

understanding, Christianity develops the theological and symbolic mode of speech and understanding.

This opens the door to a new and marvellously rich tradition of symbolism. At the heart of Christianity is the revelation of Scripture, which is at once literal and mystical. St Augustine, following a tradition already initiated by Origen and Clement of Alexandria, saw Scripture as having a threefold sense – the literal, the allegorical and the mystical. But unlike the tendency in the Neoplatonic approach to Homer and the Greek Pantheon, in which the allegorical sense negates the literal sense, Augustine likens Scripture to a human being, having a body, soul and spirit, equivalent to the literal, allegorical, and mystical senses. These three senses all belong, and a higher sense does not displace or discard a lower sense. The reason for this is that Scripture is symbolic of the Incarnation of Christ – for at the heart of Christianity is the mystery of the Eternal becoming temporal, the Infinite becoming finite, the Invisible becoming visible. The Son of God became human. The Uncreated and the Created became one. Seen in this way, the created world, which is the work of God, now becomes hierophanic, shining with divine life and meaning. As Ricoeur says in his essay ‘Manifestation and Proclamation’:

That a stone or a tree may manifest the sacred means that this profane reality becomes something other than itself while still remaining itself. It is transformed into something supernatural.<sup>12</sup>

In a new way, the vision of multiple levels of meaning in Scripture is a return to the ancient vision of the cosmos as a living intelligence, as manifesting wisdom through the natural order. With the threefold division of meaning, analogous to the human form, it also represents a reinterpretation of the correspondence between the soul and the cosmos. Thus, for example, Origen says:

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 49

Since, therefore, Scripture itself consists, as it were, of a body that is perceived, of a soul which is understood and conceived to be in the body, and of a spirit according to the shadow of the heavenly things, come, then, let us invoke him who made the body, soul, and spirit of Scripture, a body for those who have preceded us, a soul for us, and a spirit for those who are destined to possess eternal life in a future age and to arrive at the heavenly truth of the law.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that the three senses form a whole, without one sense negating another sense, or one level overriding another. The body that is perceived manifests truth visibly, the soul that is apprehended manifests truth intellectually, and the spirit made present by grace manifests truth mystically. All three meanings belong and are meant to be apprehended. Indeed, we find later in the monastic tradition an insistence on understanding the bodily or literal sense fully before seeking the other senses. Novices are reprimanded for ‘inventing’ allegorical meanings of their own out of intellectual pride. There is an insistence that the Scriptures are approached with piety and devotion, because only then is the soul able to receive gifts of grace. This attitude of piety, we recall, is what Plato also insisted upon for a truthful understanding of the order of the cosmos and the polis. Perception of the different levels of meaning depends upon the virtuous ennoblement of the soul, and in a way it would be more correct to speak of different levels of *understanding* rather than different objects of perception.

With this in mind, here is a passage from Hugh of St Victor’s *On Sacred Scripture and its Authors* teaching how one ought to attend to Scripture:

The diligent examiner of Sacred Scripture should never neglect the meanings of things. Just as our knowledge of primary things comes

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted from Origen by Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, Volume. 1. p. 143

through words, so too through the meaning of these things we come to understand what is perceived in a spiritual way and our knowledge of these things is made complete. The philosopher, in other kinds of writings, comes to know only the meaning of words, but in Sacred Scripture the meaning of things is much more excellent than the meaning of words. The first is established by usage, but the second is dictated by nature. The first is the voice of human beings, but the second is the voice of God speaking to human beings. The meaning of words is established by human convention, but the meaning of things is determined by nature; and, by the will of the Creator, certain things are signified by other things. The meaning of things is much more manifold than the meaning of words. Few words have more than two or three meanings, but a thing can mean as many other things as it has visible or invisible properties in common with other things.<sup>14</sup>

This is a remarkable passage. Our modern tendency in reading is to suppose that words give us the concept of things. But Hugh here insists that the meaning is not in the concept of the word, but in the ‘things’ the words speak of – what in modern hermeneutics is called the ‘referent’. So when Scripture speaks of the hills or herbs, the sea or the sky, the rivers or the stars, it is these things themselves that have meaning. These things are ‘dictated by nature’ and are ‘the voice of God speaking to human beings’. The things of the created world are, as it were, the vocabulary of God, and are the speech of God, the Word incarnate. So we find in the Cistercians of the twelfth century a new birth of the most ancient hierophanic vision of nature, where the profane is transformed into the sacred, yet without losing its original created nature. The Scriptures are written in the language of nature, quite distinct from the language of philosophy, and have the power to guide the soul of the contemplative reader to the mystical truth that is the true presence and meaning of the created world.

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<sup>14</sup> *Interpretation of Scripture*, edited and translated by Franklin Harkins and Frans van Lier (Brepols Publishers, 2012) p. 225

Note: Aquinas, “moral acts and human acts are one and the same thing.”  
(1a2ae, q. 1, a. 3, c.)