

Plato's Gods

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GERD VAN RIEL

PLATO'S GODS

This book presents a comprehensive study into Plato's theological doctrines, offering an important re-valuation of the status of Plato's gods and the relation between metaphysics and theology according to Plato. Starting from an examination of Plato's views of religion and the relation between religion and morality, Gerd Van Riel investigates Plato's innovative ways of speaking about the gods. This theology displays a number of diverging tendencies - viewing the gods as perfect moral actors, as cosmological principles or as celestial bodies whilst remaining true to traditional anthropomorphic representations. Plato's views are shown to be unified by the emphasis on the goodness of the gods in both their cosmological and their moral functions.

Van Riel shows that recent interpretations of Plato's theology are thoroughly metaphysical, starting from Aristotelian patterns. A new reading of the basic texts leads to the conclusion that in Plato the gods aren't metaphysical principles but souls who transmit the metaphysical order to sensible reality. The metaphysical principles play the role of a fated order to which the gods have to comply. This book will be invaluable to readers interested in philosophical theology and intellectual history.

Ashgate Studies in the History of Philosophical Theology

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Plato's Gods

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Preface

It is not an easy task to write about Plato's theology. When the series editors asked me to provide a volume on Plato's philosophical theology, I was reckless enough to believe that I could deliver in a few years' time. With the years came the awareness, however, that the subject was far more complicated than I presumed. The project ended up taking much longer than foreseen: not only did the subject matter ask for a much more thorough investigation than I prospected, but it was also held back by academic duties that prevented me from writing a book-length publication. As every downside has an upside, however, the long incubation period allowed me to ruminate and digest the subject matter more than I could ever have wished. I hope this is reflected in the end result.

The long act of postponing the matter must have driven the publishers to despair, even if this was never a real issue in our contacts. I am very grateful to Sarah Lloyd, who has always been very understanding and patient, for her encouragements and trust. I would also like to thank the series editors and reviewers for their valuable remarks, and David Lloyd Dusenbury for his excellent work in revising the English text. Obviously, I assume full responsibility for any remaining errors, be they in representing Plato's doctrines or in developing my interpretation.

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Introduction

The inconsistencies of Plato are a long story. In the *Timaeus* he says that it is impossible to name the father of this universe; and in the *Laws* he deprecates all inquiry into the nature of the deity. Again, he holds that god is entirely incorporeal (in Greek, ἀσώματος); but divine incorporeity is inconceivable, for an incorporeal deity would necessarily be incapable of sensation, and also of practical wisdom, and of pleasure, all of which are attributes essential to our conception of deity. Yet both in the *Timaeus* and the *Laws* he says that the world, the sky, the stars, the earth and our souls are gods, in addition to those in whom we have been taught to believe by ancestral tradition; but it is obvious that these propositions are both inherently false and mutually destructive.

Cicero, *De natura deorum* I, xii, 30 (tr. H. Rackham)

Plato's views on god and the divine are notoriously difficult to unravel. Cicero rightly points out that there are a lot of inconsistencies involved, and that it is hard to find a systematic doctrine that holds the different elements together.

Since he did not belong to the Platonic school, Cicero could limit himself to stating the problem and, with a slight flavour of *Schadenfreude*, leaving it unsolved. Other interpreters have limited themselves to partial accounts, studying only the *Timaeus*, for instance, and leaving open the question of how the account in that work fits in with what one reads in other dialogues.

Yet, however difficult it may be, the question of retrieving a general and systematized account of the gods in Plato has always been surfacing in literature on Plato. This is not surprising, as it is an important question, which focuses attention on the way in which the intelligible and the sensible world cohere in Plato's philosophy. Moreover, it involves an investigation of the way in which political organization ought to deal with religion, and a clarification of the foundations of morality. An inquiry into Plato's gods is thus located at the heart of Platonic philosophy.

And yet, important as it may be, it is a thematic that needs to be re-constructed: Plato never gives us a clear survey of his thoughts on things divine, and he leaves open a number of essential questions. The issue is further complicated by the fact that Greek religion and theology in the fourth century BC presented a very complex cluster of different – often mutually exclusive – tendencies. There was a clear endeavour to morally purify the image of the gods, challenging anthropomorphism, while at the same time remaining true to the traditional Homeric/Hesiodic account of the gods. And this was crossed by a tendency to view the gods as cosmic forces, or celestial bodies whose movement brings forth the order of the world. But then, the celestial bodies were seen as displaying an activity of thinking, thus again

introducing certain anthropomorphic elements into this cosmological account. Meanwhile, new (often oriental) divinities and cults found their way to Greece, further complicating the amalgam of religious beliefs and practices. Plato's views on the gods are to be seen against this background, which may even mean that some elements that we see as mutually exclusive were not perceived by him as contradictory, but rather as an expression of the diversity of religious phenomena in this period.

In view of this situation, it should not come as a surprise that there are a great many different views on the matter. Some interpreters stress the cosmological elements in Plato's theology, seeing Plato's gods as the personified forces responsible for bringing order to the sensible world, and take this to be the central key to a valid interpretation. Others emphasize the metaphysical claims involved in Plato's account of the gods, and put forward a reading that first and foremost concentrates on Plato's god as a metaphysical principle.

We shall deal with this central aspect of an overall interpretation of Plato's theology in due course, but we should point out from the start how this book relates to the issues at stake. After a period in which the cosmological interpretation was the dominant one – from, say, 1900 to 1960 – the mainstream interpretation of Plato's theology has shifted towards a metaphysical reading. In most recent works on the matter, Plato's gods – or rather Plato's (supreme) god – is depicted as his highest metaphysical principle. This interpretation is basically guided by the presupposition that, even if there is a plethora of Platonic gods, they need to be hierarchically subordinated to a metaphysical principle on which all other things depend. Hence, this principle should be seen as 'the' ultimate god.

This interpretation, we shall argue, is based on Aristotelian premises. In the Aristotelian tradition,¹ metaphysics and theology converge on the idea that the highest being (god) is the ultimate instance in which all principles of being are present in the purest way. In Aristotelian metaphysics, god is pure act, pure form, self-thinking thought (as the highest performance of the highest possible activity), and the final cause of the universe. Hence, according to the Aristotelian tradition, god is the cornerstone of metaphysics, the principle that holds an entire system together.

The metaphysical interpretation of Plato's theology is by and large shaped by these Aristotelian patterns. If Plato's system can be shown to depend on a single

¹ As argued by Richard Bodéüs (*Aristote et la théologie des vivants immortels* (Montréal and Paris, 1992), Aristotle's own view of the gods should be clearly distinguished from the interpretation of Aristotelian philosophical theology moulded by the tradition. If Bodéüs is right (even if very radical), then Aristotle's gods are not metaphysical or physical principles, but they have remained traditional divinities. It is ironic that Bodéüs blames Platonism for the 'metaphysical' reading of Aristotle's theology. According to him, Aristotle would have been read through the lens of Plato's metaphysics, with an emphasis on provident transcendence. The whole point of our enterprise is to show that this is not Plato's own view. If it is not Aristotle's view either, then it will be the result of a systematization of Aristotelian metaphysical theology, in which Platonic patterns will obviously have played a role.

metaphysical principle, then this principle ought to be identified as god, since theology is part of the metaphysical project.

This book will challenge these basis premises by way of a renewed examination of the source material. The thesis we shall develop here is that applying the Aristotelian patterns to Plato is anachronistic. Plato surely was the first to establish firm metaphysical views, based on his theory of Forms and culminating in the inaccessible Form of the Good. Yet his theology can be shown to be different from his metaphysics. As opposed to the claims of Aristotelian metaphysics, Plato's gods are not metaphysical principles. They constitute a multitude of divine souls, each of whom has the specific task of looking after (part of) the sensible world. This means that a new assessment of the relation between theology and metaphysics imposes itself, as an alternative to Aristotelian presuppositions. This project of 'de-Aristotelianizing' the interpretation of Plato's theology will be taken up in the third chapter of the book.

The second chapter is conceived as a preparation to this reinterpretation, by investigating Plato's ways of 'speaking about the gods' (θεολογία), and his developing a number of basic rules to render an appropriate image of the gods. These rules envisage a purification of the image of the gods, building on a tendency that was instigated by earlier thinkers like the poet Xenophanes. In Plato, this purification stresses the gods' goodness, thus begging the question of how the gods relate to the Good. At the same time, this raises the issue of the gods' function in the universe, as their goodness entails that they safeguard its order. The moral excellence attributed to the gods is thus coextensive with their cosmic function. The order of the world is the expression of a goodness that sets itself forth in the moral conduct of gods and human beings. In light of this conclusion, we shall inquire into the nature of the gods' existence as thinking souls, and into the different instances of gods: the traditional pantheon and the celestial bodies.

The first chapter sets the stage by investigating Plato's religion. For indeed, before tackling the question of how Plato's systematized view on theology may look, it should be asked how religion functions within the Platonic city, and how religion and morality are bound together. And in fact, the first chapter will provide us with a basic notion of piety that will remain in place throughout the subsequent chapters. We shall argue, on the basis of Plato's *Laws* Book IV, that piety consists in 'taking god as the measure', thus admonishing human beings to be moderate, and not take themselves to be gods. This powerful axiom can be shown to lie at the basis of Plato's 'speaking about the gods', and ultimately, to underlie his views on the relation between theology and metaphysics.

In this vein, we should add that this book does not claim to have solved all of the difficulties we have alluded to. As stated above, some of these are part and parcel of the complex situation of religiosity in the fourth century BC. But rather than stating the inconsistencies and having done with it, as Cicero did, we should try to articulate a unifying view that at least solves more questions than it raises. We hope to accomplish this, even if it means that Plato may eventually be shown to be more archaic than is commonly held – in which case, as we shall argue, his

archaism could have its good sides. A view of the gods and of theology that does not explain away all inconsistencies, and does not rationalize all aspects into a metaphysical system, may indeed be the expression of a more authentic religious experience.

Chapter 1

Plato's Religion

1 Plato on the Origin of Religion

1.1 Nature (*Φύσις*) and Convention (*Νόμος*)

One of the most important discussions to issue out of what is called the fifth-century enlightenment in ancient Greece, was the debate on the opposition between nature (*φύσις*) and convention (*νόμος*). As a result of several changes and innovations in Greek society, and of colonizations and discoveries of non-Greek cultures, the ancestral beliefs and practices were no longer seen as inevitable, natural phenomena, but rather as the effect of invention and convention. This switch from nature to convention is well known. It underlies the entire sophistic movement and is the solid basis of the foundation and organization of new cities – a process in which the sophists actively took part. New colonies were founded and old colonies refounded, while for both, new constitutions had to be drawn up. The most famous attempts in this rush for constitutions are of course those made by Plato himself. His *Republic* and *Laws*, or indeed his entire philosophical project, would be inconceivable without the underlying acceptance that society, and the role of the individual in it, can be made. It is hardly a coincidence that the basic word to indicate ‘convention’ in the fifth-century discussion is *νόμος* (lit. ‘law’), rather than any other word, such as *θέσις* (‘founding’). This is evidence for the fact that the city and its laws (*νόμοι*) are seen as providing the paradigm of conventional organization. One could of course dwell on the importance of this feature for the emergence of democracy in ancient Greece. For present purposes, however, it is more interesting to investigate the extent to which religious practice and belief is involved in this view of society as a product of convention, and in particular, how Plato himself – the king, so to speak, of constitutional conventionalism or conventional constitutionalism – accounts for the origin of religion. Is it by nature or by convention?

There is evidence that the fifth-century Greeks, or at least the intellectual upper class, considered religion to be a matter of convention: a fragment of Pindar reads ‘Law (*Νόμος*), king of all, of mortals and immortals’ (fr. 169), which would imply that the immortals are submitted to law (*νόμος*). But of course, it remains to be explained what is meant by ‘law’ in this context: it might also be a divine force, which would mean that there is no case for conventionalism after all. In Euripides, however, some 40 years later, the idea is made clearer and stronger:

'through law (νόμος) we believe in gods' (*Hecuba* 798).¹ This is in line – as is often the case with Euripides – with ideas propagated by the sophists, who gave a rationalizing account of the origins of worship of the gods. People, they say, paid honour to those things that were vital and useful: earth, moon, sun, water, and new crops and plants (like grain: Demeter, and wine: Dionysus).² Hence, religion is conventional: it is instituted on the basis of our daily needs and the usefulness of those things that allow us to satisfy them.

This is the situation at the moment when Plato started writing. As could be expected, his answer is not quite in agreement with the prevailing opinion, and in the end, he will even do away with the discussion on nature and convention.

1.2 Politics Cannot Institute Religion

It is obvious from the *Republic* and the *Laws* that Plato wants the state to interfere in the smallest aspects of life. But when reading these dialogues, it is very striking that this interference does not concern religion. Of course, the lawgiver must organize and warrant religious practice, but Plato never treats religion in itself as something to be instituted by the state. Religion is not 'founded'. This picture emerges from Plato's descriptions of how elementary states grow organically out of primitive conglomerations of individuals and families (*Rep.* II, 369b–374e and *Laws* III, 677a–681c). In this context, nothing is said about a possible starting point of religion. If we follow what is said in this respect in the *Republic* (II, 369b–372d), we learn that people first came together for the exchange of goods that allowed them to meet their daily needs: food, housing, clothing, and so forth. The basic state is very much focused on economy and utility, and everything within it is done to facilitate the supply of products and services. But, of course, this opens a dynamic that can hardly be stopped, as the people begin to look for better and more luxurious products; these elicit new needs, in turn, and soon enough this leads to conflict and war (II, 372d–374e). Hence the need of guardians to protect the state, from within and without, while these guardians must be educated to an outstanding level of moral life.

In the education of the guardians, particular attention is paid to the theology handed down by the poets (II, 377b–383c). Plato bans poetry from his state for several reasons, one of which is the immoral character of the poets' accounts of the gods. So it is beyond question that the state has to watch over the purity of religious beliefs. But it is another thing to say that the state is to institute or found religion. That idea is explicitly rejected at *Republic* IV, 427b–e, where Plato concludes a survey of the things that must be organized by law, in the following way:

¹ The quotations are taken from Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), p. 313.

² Cf. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, pp. 313–14.

Adeimantus: What is now left for us to deal with under the heading of legislation?

Socrates: For us nothing, but for the Delphic Apollo it remains to enact the greatest, finest, and first of laws.

A: What laws are those?

S: Those having to do with the establishing of temples, sacrifices, and other forms of service to gods, daemons, and heroes, the burial of the dead, and the services that ensure their favour. We have no knowledge of these things, and in establishing our city, if we have any understanding, we won't be persuaded to trust them to anyone other than the ancestral guide. And this god, sitting upon the rock at the centre of the earth, is without a doubt the ancestral guide on these matters for all people. (*Rep.* IV, 427b–c, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve)

Thus, religion and religious practice fall outside the scope of Plato's constitutional arrangements in the *Republic*, and rest upon ancestral traditions, guided by their own legislator, the Delphic Apollo.³

The same idea is expressed in the *Laws* (III, 677a–681c), where we find a similar description of the origins of community and of lawgiving. In the earliest times, people did not suffer any lack; there was no injustice or jealousy, and no religious dissidence:

Now the community in which neither wealth nor poverty exists will generally produce the finest characters because tendencies to violence and crime, and feelings of jealousy and envy, simply do not arise. So these men were *good*, partly for that very reason, partly because of what we might call their 'naïveté'. When they heard things labelled 'good' or 'bad', they were so artless as to think it a statement of the literal truth and believe it. This lack of sophistication precluded the cynicism you find today: they accepted as the truth the doctrine they heard about gods and men, and lived their lives in accordance with it. (*Laws* III, 679b–c, tr. T.J. Saunders, his emphasis)

Hence, these people did not need (positive) law. And, again, religion is said to be older and, so to speak, more natural than constitutions and laws. It is only when smaller communities start to conglomerate into a larger whole that the lawgiver must decide which set of traditional practices of which group must be taken over by all members of the community (III, 681c). Moreover, private sanctuaries are forbidden in the *Laws*, because they often are erected for unwholesome purposes, and most importantly, because they threaten the political cohesion of the city. When they are discovered, such sanctuaries must immediately be transferred to

³ On the role of Apollo as lawgiver and warrant of legislation see Glenn R. Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City: A Historical Interpretation of the Laws* (Princeton, 1960), pp. 402–11.

public temples (see, e.g., *Laws* X, 909e–910d).⁴ These are manifest examples of the city's directing or sanctioning the religious cult. In general, however, it is clearly stated in the *Laws* that the lawgiver must not touch the existing gods, temples, rituals, ceremonies, and so forth:

It does not matter whether he is founding a new state from scratch or reconstructing an old one that has gone to ruin: in either case, if he has any sense, he will never dream of altering whatever instructions may have been received from Delphi or Dodona or Ammon about the gods and temples that ought to be founded by the various groups in the state, and the gods or daemons after whom the temples should be named. [...] The legislator must not tamper with any of this in the slightest detail. (*Laws* V, 738b–d, tr. T.J. Saunders)

There are, of course, to be magistrates for the state's religious services, and above all, supervisors of its religious affairs,⁵ but they are to administer and oversee cults that predate the establishment of the state. Even the appointment of priests in this state must be made by lot, for it is thereby left to god to decide, although of course the candidates are screened for capability and purity (*Laws* VI, 759a–760a). At any rate, religion is treated very carefully in the *Laws*, with a clear concern 'not to shake the unshakeable'⁶ or reduce the divine subject to human measure. For god is 'the measure of all things' (πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον), and we must do as he pleases (*Laws* IV, 716c).⁷ The only – but by no means the insignificant – task of the state is to supervise its people's religiosity and condemn atheists (see *Laws* X, 907d–909d). We shall have to come back to all these issues. But in general terms, we may already state that Plato's lawgiving and constitution presuppose that religious beliefs and practices are a matter of ancestral tradition.

1.3 The Myth of Prometheus

In the context of his descriptions of the elementary state, Plato does not indicate why the legislator must abstain from interfering in religious matters. Ascribing this abstinence to god's being the measure (μέτρον θεός) might well not be convincing. One could respond, for instance, that the state should take care of religion precisely because the state surmounts the individual perspective, and thus that a kind of usurpation of religious practice by the lawgiver might save the right religious perspective (taking god as a measure), rather than doing away with

⁴ See also Luc Brisson, 'Les funérailles des vérificateurs (*euthunoi*) dans les *Lois*. Une lecture commentée de *Lois* XIII 945c–948b', *Ktêma*, 30 (2005), pp. 189–96.

⁵ See Luc Brisson and Jean-François Pradeau, *Platon. Les Lois*. Traduction inédite, introduction et notes, 2 vols (Paris, 2006), vol. 1, pp. 439–56: *Annexe 2. Les magistratures dans les Lois* (particularly on cult: pp. 443–4).

⁶ μή κινεῖν τὰ ἀκίνητα: *Laws* III, 684e1; VIII, 843a1; XI, 913b9.

⁷ On this text, and its importance in Plato's view of religion, see below, pp. 17–19.

it. It is a similar concern to safeguard orthodoxy by imposing unity that we find in contemporary churches, the Catholic Church being the most obvious example.

So we must look for a further reason why Plato's state abstains from instituting religion, and the myth of Prometheus in the *Protagoras* (320d–322d) provides an interesting clue. As I have argued elsewhere,⁸ this myth is not just a marvellous piece of sophistic literature that falls short of the standard of philosophical interest one encounters in the myths of other dialogues. No matter how much this myth is influenced by Protagoras' own teaching, the text as we have it is Plato's work, and it expresses a number of anthropological points that represent his own doctrines.

One of these anthropological points is that religion is rooted in human nature, even before human beings start to establish a communal life. Hence, the reason for Plato's political abstinence from religion is an anthropological one: religion is more profoundly attached to human nature than sociality, and that is why the state – as an organization of man's sociality – cannot act upon this deeper level.

In the sophistic debates over nature and convention, a particular issue of interest was humankind's apparently *non*-adapted natural condition. Technique, art, medicine, and so on, were praised as decisive steps with which mankind gained its superiority over nature. This is the subject, for example, of the second stasimon of Sophocles' *Antigone* (with the famous phrase: 'Many are the great things', 'πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ'), and of the myth of Prometheus, the giver of fire, who remedied the inaptitude of human nature.

We find exactly this myth in the *Protagoras*, but in a version that is considerably different from the traditional Greek story. The *Protagoras* text is famous enough, but I shall recall its headlines. The time has come for living beings to be brought to the light, and they are all to be equipped with the natural powers that will be needed to warrant and assure their survival. The task of distributing these powers is handed over to the brother Titans, Prometheus and Epimetheus. The latter is the silly little brother, the family's stupid, who recklessly asks permission to accomplish the mission on his own. And he sets himself to work: to some animals he gives claws, to others wings, quick or strong limbs, and so on, all in order to secure the survival of each species. Epimetheus gives every kind of animal protection against mutual destruction and natural enemies, against the seasons, and against hunger and thirst. Weak animals are given high fertility, large animals receive strong skins, and so on. Everything looks very harmonious, and Epimetheus is satisfied with his achievement – until, suddenly, he notices one species, somewhere in a corner, which he has completely forgotten. This is humankind: naked, barefoot, without claws, entirely deprived of the natural means of defence. And the problem is that time is short: a solution must be found

⁸ See my 'Religion and Morality. Elements of Plato's Anthropology in the Myth of Prometheus (*Protagoras* 320 D – 322 D)', in Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco J. Gonzalez, (eds), *Plato and Myth. Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, Mnemosyne Supplements. Monographs on Greek and Latin Language and Literature, 337. (Leiden and Boston, 2012), pp. 145–64.

at once, since the day has come on which all the animals must be brought to the light. Prometheus now has to help his brother, so he hastily steals the divine fire from the working places of Hephaestus and Athena. Thanks to fire, humankind has technique as a stand-in for the human lack of natural defences. And thanks to fire, human beings are able to develop culture: religion, language, clothing, housing, and so on. The worst problem, however, is not yet solved: fire does not protect human beings from their natural enemies. To protect themselves against these horrible threats, people attempt to live together, but because they lack social abilities (called πολιτικὴ τέχνη, the 'art of being citizens'), they again become scattered, and again fall prey to wild animals. This continues until, finally, the supreme god Zeus brings safety: he donates right or justice (δίκη), and respect or shame (αἰδώς), which enable people to live together. Now, at last, humankind has the social skills (πολιτικὴ τέχνη) it requires, and these are based on the divine gifts of justice (i.e., laws and parallel societal abilities) and shame (i.e., *observantia* in a broad sense: respecting others and their tasks, abiding by the laws). In a short dialogue that closes this myth, Hermes, who has to deliver Zeus' gifts to humankind, asks whether he ought to be selective, as is the case for humans' technical skills. 'No', says Zeus, and he immediately promulgates a law: everyone must partake of the divine gifts, and 'death to those who cannot partake of respect and justice, for they are a pestilence to the city' (*Prot.* 322d, tr. S. Lombardo and K. Bell).

This is not a very nice picture of the beginning of human life. Epimetheus' (After-thought) optimism in handling it alone may be praiseworthy, but his failure is dramatic. Prometheus (Fore-thought) brings a partial solution, but he does not have the time or the occasion to solve the worst of humankind's problems. In the mean time, human beings are perishing and suffering. And all this is taking place while Zeus is watching, high upon his mountain, surrounded by terrifying guardians. Only when everything is going wrong does he come into action: after pages of sorrow and failure, Zeus needs only a few lines to bring the solution. As a despot, he rules by means of decrees, which are promulgated by his messenger Hermes. And even if his solution consists in a gift, it is accompanied by the threat of capital punishment for all those who neglect it.

This Platonic version of the Prometheus myth does not tell us a euphoric story of human supremacy. It is not a shout of joy – like Sophocles' 'Many are the great things, and nothing is greater than man' – but rather a story of bitter misery. Plato's version of the myth of Prometheus is much more negative than what one finds in many other versions of the story. In particular, the central role attributed to Epimetheus, who causes the problem and is held responsible for Prometheus' punishment, highlights the dramatic failure that characterizes the origin of human existence. Humankind is not saved by its supremacy, but rather conversely, it eventually gains its supremacy as the effect of its salvation, and that marks an important difference.

Yet the overall message of the story is not pessimistic: in the end, human beings *do* acquire a supremacy over nature, which allows them to distinguish themselves

from purely animal life, and to become moral actors in a community. They thus enter a sphere of life that is not strictly natural; communal life provides qualities over and above humankind's strictly biological condition: art, skills, religion, language and social abilities. For our purposes, it is of essential importance to see that this accession to a non-biologic order is accomplished in two phases, while the difference between them lies, in the first place, in the fact that they cure different troubles. But there is an important additional element that accounts for this difference. Once the first, Promethean, gift is handed over to humankind, we are offered a description of *real* human life: human skills and craftsmanship, as well as religion and language, *are* actually practised with the aid of fire. People are organizing their lives and trying to cope with practical problems – although they fail in their attempts to live together.

This being the case, we must infer that an important event has taken place in the story, without being explicitly mentioned: immediately after the theft of fire, which we know was very urgent, humankind has been brought to the light. The day has broken on which all animals are led from within the earth to the life that was prepared for them. And this takes place *before* humankind's second gift is received: Zeus gives justice and shame when he sees that the poor humans are craving and weak, because of their incapacity to live together. This implies that there is an important difference between the human beings who merely possess fire, and the social abilities that result from Zeus' gift. The first gift, fire, is actually branded into their existence – it is theirs *before* they come to be. So, although neither of the gifts is strictly natural, fire and its results are more closely bound to human nature than is social ability, which is handed over to humans *after* they have come to be.⁹

This means, then, that the anthropological issues of religion and morality – which are represented by fire and the gifts of Zeus, respectively – have a different status. This is our clue to the way in which Plato's religion is attached to human nature. The gift of justice and shame is not the handing-over of a fully articulated morality or social ability, but rather, it represents the germ of civic duty, which every citizen has to develop through education and experience.¹⁰ Religion, on the other hand, was already fully developed and practised at the time of human beings' first attempts to lead their life. This means that religion – an effect of the possession of fire – is more deeply rooted in human nature than sociality. It is more fundamental and, so to speak, more 'natural' than what is handed over in the second gift of the Prometheus myth. So a religious attitude precedes all kinds of social behaviour, and of community. And this is why Plato refuses to let his lawgivers interfere in religious matters: laws and constitutions belong to a different *anthropological* level than religion.

⁹ Cf. W.K.C. Guthrie, *In the Beginning: Some Greek Views on the Origins of Life and the Early State of Man* (Ithaca, NY, 1957), p. 89.

¹⁰ Cf. my 'Religion and Morality', pp. 155–9.

2 Piety and the Service of the Gods

Thus far, we have seen how Plato safeguards traditional forms of religious practice within his constitutions, on the basis that religion is not, for him, a matter of convention or positive law. But what is to be understood by this term 'religion'? We cannot fail to stress that the Greeks did not know such a notion. And even the word 'theology', shaped by Plato, indicates a rather vague 'speaking about the gods', rather than a technical exploration of religious beliefs. To be sure, there was no uniform set of Greek beliefs; there were no sacred texts, no dogmas. There was just a general acceptance of the existence of the gods, and a social pressure to observe the more or less institutionalized rituals and ceremonies. But there do not seem to have been demands concerning personal belief or concerning a sincere commitment to religious practice.

In an address that he wants to be delivered to colonists of the new Platonic City, the Athenian Stranger of the *Laws* gives a solemn declaration about the religiosity that should lead them, and about their 'service of the gods' (θεράπεια θεῶν, *Laws* IV, 716d). This text is one of our major sources for Plato's insights into religiosity, and we shall have occasion to return to it in the next section. But it also serves our present purposes, as it enables us to understand how Plato conceives of the service of the gods, and how his views relate to the more traditional patterns of Greek religiosity.

In this address to his colonists, Plato makes a link between god and justice, which implies that whoever commits injustice will be punished. So one must do what pleases god, knowing that god, and not humankind, is the measure of all things. Thus, those who are good will be loved by god:

If a good man sacrifices to the gods and keeps them constant company in his prayers and offerings and every kind of worship he can give them, this will be the best and noblest policy he can follow; it is the conduct that fits his character as nothing else can, and it is his most effective way of achieving a happy life. But if the wicked man does it, the results are bound to be just the opposite. Whereas the good man's soul is clean, the wicked man's soul is polluted, and it is never right for a good man or for god to receive gifts from unclean hands – which means that even if impious people do lavish a lot of attention on the gods, they are wasting their time, whereas the trouble taken by the pious is very much in season. (*Laws* IV, 716e–717a, tr. T.J. Saunders)

Thus, piety is a necessary condition for authentic religiosity, and Plato immediately goes on to determine what this means, by asking what the 'missiles' (βέλη, 717a4–5) are that allow us to hit this target. In our offerings to the Olympian gods (who protect the city), and to the gods of the underworld, we must follow definite prescriptions: to the latter we must bring sacrifices of second quality, of an even number and taken from the left side of the sacrificial victim, whereas the former must be given offerings of first quality, of an odd number and taken from

the right-hand side. After these gods come the daemons and the heroes, followed by rites in honour of the family gods and the honours to be paid to our parents: for we must pay back what we received from them, and be aware that all we have – our wealth, our body and our soul – belong to those who bore and bred us. A lack of piety towards parents will be punished by the gods. And this piety must be observed even after their death: we must give them a decent burial, pay respect to them and preserve their memory. Finally, piety implies obligations towards our offspring, our kinsmen, friends and fellow citizens, and foreign guests.

This list of 'missiles' for hitting piety is quite long: it is not just about serving the gods, but also includes – and actually, this is the most substantial part of the passage – that we honour our parents, family members, and so forth, and that we pay due respect to them after their deaths. So the religious phenomena are rather diverse, and what holds them together seems to be a kind of observance of natural relationships and a vigilance of right conduct towards the dead, as towards friends and foreigners.

But what then of the requirement, as mentioned above, that we be *good*? We are facing here a problem that emerges in many religious traditions: am I good because I do all these 'pious' things, or am I good because I do them with the right inner disposition? What if I do respect the correct ceremonial procedures and behave correctly towards my parents? Does that make me pious? In the passage quoted above, Plato seems to say that it does, and this may have been perfectly understandable for his fellow citizens: in their eyes, it was sufficient to be seen as acting in accordance with the formal rules of religion. Yet, in Plato the case *is* different. Although in this list of pious acts he gives the impression of paying attention only to outward acts, one must not forget the Athenian's introductory remarks, namely, that the ritual gifts of impious people are a waste of time, whereas a good person's gifts are always welcomed. So Plato does add an important requirement of acting with the right attitude.

This additional requirement changes the emphasis from our external deeds to our inner disposition, and takes us into the horizon of morality. For, indeed, Plato's whole project of re-defining morality is based on a shift of emphasis from the merely outward appearance (in the Homeric ideal of heroic tales) towards the internal good disposition that is reflected in outer deeds. Thus, for instance, in the *Republic*, the virtue of justice is characterized as follows:

It [justice] isn't concerned with someone's doing his own externally, but with what is inside him, with what is truly himself and his own. One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other. He regulates well what is really his own and rules himself. He puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts of himself like three limiting notes in a musical scale – high, low and middle. He binds together those parts and any others there may be in between, and from having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious. Only then does he act. And when he

does anything, whether acquiring wealth, taking care of his body, engaging in politics, or in private contracts – in all of these, he believes that the action is just and fine that preserves this inner harmony and helps achieve it, and calls it so, and regards as wisdom the knowledge that oversees such actions. And he believes that the action that destroys this harmony is unjust, and calls it so, and regards the belief that oversees it as ignorance. (*Rep.* IV, 443c–444a, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve)

The internal order thus precedes external actions, and a person's inner disposition is determinant for their moral conduct. Moreover, this inner disposition is clearly defined as involving wisdom or knowledge, so that good moral behaviour can only be the result of good insight into what virtue is about. Hence, *any* commendable or morally right conduct can be shown to be rooted in a well-ordered inner state.

On the other hand, the performance of virtuous acts reveals the perfection of the inner state: a good action could never have taken place if it weren't rooted in the good inner disposition. In that sense, the outward action remains an important touchstone for deciding whether a person really has achieved Platonic virtue, yet his criterion for virtuousness is no longer the outer deed, but the internal perfection that brought it about.

This analysis can be extended to all virtues, and as we have seen, it is applied to piety in the *Laws* – for piety is a virtue, and it is always treated by Plato in close connection with other virtues, especially justice and temperance. What we read in the *Laws*, then, is fully in line with Plato's overall account of moral principles. In religious matters (the religious phenomena being larger than just worshipping the gods), truly good conduct can only reveal itself on the basis of a good inner state.

But after all, and although religion and morality are not the same and do not have the same origin, there remains a very close connection between religion and morality. That is what Plato would argue against ritual formalism or insincere religious practice.

3 Religion and Morality

It is clear – and Plato would probably not deny it – that people can be religious without actually being moral, or just. This is the case, for instance, with religious fanatics, or with a person like Euthyphro, who in the dialogue named after him wants his father to be sentenced for having neglectfully killed the murderer of one of his slaves. The reason why Euthyphro wants to try his father is to expiate this murder and get back into favour with the gods (*Euthyphr.* 4c). It need not

disturb us that Euthyphro himself protests that he acts out of piety, since Socrates' reaction makes it clear that it would at very least be too simple (in Plato's eyes) to call Euthyphro a pious man, when he is actually neglecting the piety that is owed towards his father. But, nevertheless, Euthyphro is a *religious* man, whose religiosity, or self-declared piety towards the gods makes him blind to the concrete aspects of his decisions.¹¹ He is religious without respect of persons (cf. *Euthphr.* 5d), and I believe that this proves to be the core of Socrates' issue with him: Euthyphro seems to know what he has to do, no matter how cruel or disproportionate the consequences may be. And although this dialogue does not end with a clear-cut definition of piety, it is obvious that Euthyphro's decision does not correspond to the Platonic virtue of piety.

So one can be religious without being moral, but one cannot, conversely, be moral without being religious. As we shall see, the *Laws* Book X presents atheism not only as an intellectual error, but also as leading to immorality. For, indeed, Platonic morality implies that one accepts the existence of the gods. This point is made right at the start of the relevant discussion, were the Athenian describes the state of mind of youngsters who feel attracted to atheism:

So our address to men with such a depraved outlook should be calm, and runs as follows. Let's use honeyed words and abate our anger, and pretend we're addressing just one representative individual. 'Now then, my lad, you're still young, and as time goes on you'll come to adopt opinions diametrically opposed to those you hold now. Why not wait till later on to make up your mind about these important matters? The most important of all, however lightly you take it at the moment, is to get the right ideas about the gods and so live a good life – otherwise you'll live a bad one'. (*Laws* X, 888a–b, tr. T.J. Saunders)

This means that the morally good life goes hand in hand with a right conception of the gods. Even more: without belief in gods, abiding by the laws and morality in itself would become a matter of pure obligation and force, rather than a reasoned choice:

All this, my friends, is the theme of experts [i.e. the atheists] – as our young people regard them – who in their prose and poetry maintain that anything one can get away with by force is absolutely justified [...] Is he [i.e. the legislator] simply to stand up in public and threaten all the citizens with punishment if they don't admit the existence of gods and mentally accept the law's description of

¹¹ The question has been raised whether Euthyphro was a member of a religious sect, like Orphism, or a zealous adherent of traditional religion (see, e.g., Louis-André Dorion, *Platon: Lachès, Euthyphron* (Paris, 1997), pp. 180–85, who opts, quite rightly so, for Euthyphro's traditionalism). This question can be avoided here. The important thing for present purposes is that Euthyphro's attitude draws the dilemma between various conceptions of piety, and opens the perspective on the moral content of piety.

them? He could make the same threat about their notions of beauty and justice and all such vital concepts, as well as about anything that encourages virtue or vice; he could demand that the citizens' belief and actions should accord with his written instructions, and insist that anyone not showing the proper obedience to the laws must be punished either by death, or by a whipping or imprisonment, deprivation of civic rights, or by being sent into exile a poorer man. (*Laws* X, 890a–c, tr. T.J. Saunders, my bracketed additions)

Thus, if atheism were the rule, virtue would merely be the effect of punishment and retribution (or the fear of an anticipated punishment), that is: the effect of the exercise of power by the powerful. Belief in gods, on the other hand, renders a life good, just and virtuous in itself, because it acknowledges the order installed by the divine soul, coupled with a divine intellect who governs the universe. Not only does this divinity bring order to the celestial movements, but it also institutes an order of justice and the other virtues in nature. Thus, arguing that nature (φύσις) itself is the effect of an operation of 'art' (τέχνη) or 'law' (νόμος),¹² Plato eventually surmounts the longstanding debate on the priority of either nature or convention. The divine law of the intellect that governs the universe determines the standards, the laws and norms to which nature must comply (*Laws* X, 890b–892c; 897b–898c). Hence, we, as human beings, must strive for the higher, not only by being religious (i.e., by accepting that the gods exist and that they care for us), but also by being virtuous (i.e., accepting that the moral order, and justice in particular, is instituted by the gods themselves). For it is the soul which, being the cause of all motion, produces good and evil, the ugly, the beautiful and all such opposite things (X, 896d), while what matters is to choose the good in all circumstances (X, 897a–b).

Thus, Platonic morality is deduced from a religious attitude or, more precisely, from the acceptance of the existence of the gods and the acknowledgement that we ought to orient ourselves towards that which is most divine in us. On the other hand, a failure in the religious order (i.e., atheism) causes a failure in morality as well.

This is why piety is counted among the virtues, and always treated in connection with justice. We are not only to worship the gods for fear of punishment if we don't, or for hope of reward if we do; our main reason for worshipping the gods is the recognition of our place in the cosmos, and of the divine instruction to strive for what is higher. This experience of a kind of uplifting is constitutive for the religious as well as for the moral order. Hence, from the *Euthyphro* (one of Plato's earliest works) until the *Laws* (his last work), a straight line can be drawn concerning the connection of piety and justice.¹³ The main idea is that piety

¹² See below, pp. 42–5.

¹³ Louise Bruit-Zaidman, 'Impies et impiété de l'*Euthyphron* aux *Lois*', in Jérôme Laurent (ed.), *Les dieux de Platon* (Caen, 2003), pp. 153–68 also elaborates on this relation between the *Euthyphro* and the *Laws* Book X.

consists in doing what 'pleases the god' (θεοφιλής), and since justice is the main characteristic of the divine,¹⁴ our being just is an outstanding mark of piety.¹⁵

But there is yet another connection between piety and virtue, and perhaps a more important one, although it has been somewhat neglected in secondary literature. For if we go back to our discussion of the *Euthyphro*, the main character's decision to bring his father to trial – a decision with which Socrates obviously disagrees – is not overcome by saying that it is unjust. In Euthyphro's eyes, trying his father in this case is the most just thing to do: justice is blind, and must be pursued without any consideration that might offend a neutral attitude. So Euthyphro could not only maintain that he is acting in a religious manner – as we have seen – but even that he is just. Similarly, a fanatical suicide bomber would also call his action a deed of supreme piety and justice. So the problem of the *Euthyphro* is not solved by connecting religion to justice, and stating that Euthyphro does not hit true religiosity because he lacks justice. It is neither justice nor religiosity that is falling short in his case. What Euthyphro actually does is put aside one instance of piety or justice (that towards his father) in favour of another instance of piety or justice (the duty to punish injustice and murder), at the risk of becoming impious after all. Socrates is left – and we, as readers, are left – with the question of how to discriminate between the two options, and how to argue for the purity or superiority of what we would choose. Euthyphro is obviously wrong, but it is not easy to say why he is.

Plato eventually found an answer to the dilemma that was left open in the *Euthyphro*. In the abovementioned passage from the *Laws* (IV, 715e–719a), Plato establishes a clear link between the impiety of those who take themselves as measure, and their lack of justice and moderation at the level of morality. By presenting things like this, Plato links piety not only to justice, but also to *temperance* or *moderation* (σωφροσύνη):

The man who means to live in happiness latches on to her [i.e., divine law] and follows her with meekness and humility. But he who bursts with pride, elated by wealth or honours or by physical beauty when young and foolish, whose soul is afire with the arrogant belief that so far from needing someone to control and lead him, he can play the leader to others – there's a man whom God has deserted. And in his desolation he collects others like himself, and in his soaring frenzy he causes universal chaos. Many people think he cuts a fine figure, but before very long he pays to Justice no trifling penalty and brings himself, his home and state to rack and ruin. Thus it is ordained. (*Laws* IV, 716a–b, tr. T.J. Saunders)

This disdain for arrogant people, who take themselves to be master of the divine law, is further elaborated a few lines later, where we read:

¹⁴ *Rep.* X, 612b–d; cf. IV, 427d–e; *Prot.* 331a–e.

¹⁵ Cf. Bruit-Zaidman 'Impies et impiété', p. 168.

So what conduct recommends itself to god and reflects his wishes? There is only one sort, epitomised in the old saying 'like approves of like' (excess apart, which is both its own enemy and that of due proportion). In our view it is god who is pre-eminently the 'measure of all things', much more so than any 'man', as they say. So if you want to recommend yourself to someone of this character, you must do your level best to make your own character reflect his, and on this principle the moderate man is god's friend, being like him, whereas the immoderate and unjust man is not like him and is his enemy; and the same reasoning applies to the other vices too. (*Laws* IV, 716c–d, tr. T.J. Saunders)

This is an extremely important passage; it has been epoch-making both in Neoplatonism and Christianity, presenting god as the measure, and adding that we ourselves must be moderate, that is, we must try to accommodate to this divine measure, in an attempt to reflect god's character, and hence to be loved by him.

This is emphatically repeated once again by way of a conclusion to this passage:

on this principle the moderate man is God's friend, being like him, whereas the immoderate and unjust man is not like him and is his enemy. (*Laws* IV, 716d, tr. T.J. Saunders)

The divine law expressed here requires that one must be moderate (σώφρων) in order to be loved by god, and to hit moral goodness. I believe this ultimately provides an answer to the *Euthyphro*'s dilemma: Euthyphro's action is not pious, not because it is not religious, nor because it is unjust, but because it is intemperate. Euthyphro pretends to *know* what god wants, and to know how he must comply with god's will, while he neglects all concrete circumstances or consequences. He thus takes the place of god, making himself the measure, and – by that very fact – becoming immoderate. Euthyphro is a specimen of the arrogant people described in the *Laws*, as may be clear from his reply to Socrates:

Socr.: Whereas, by Zeus, Euthyphro, you think that your knowledge of the divine, and of piety and impiety, is so accurate that, when those things happened as you say, you have no fear of having acted impiously in bringing your father to trial?

Euth.: I should be of no use, Socrates, and Euthyphro would not be superior to the majority of men, if I did not have accurate knowledge of all such things. (*Euthyphro* 4e–5a)

This passage also intimates an epistemological aspect of piety. It is true that for Socrates virtue is knowledge, as it is stated in the *Protagoras*¹⁶ and elsewhere, but this claim must not be detached from its complement, namely the statement

¹⁶ *Prot.* 349a–350c.

that Socrates knows that he does not know. Wisdom is the recognition of one's ultimate ignorance, and Socrates addresses those who claim to know with severe irony, forcing them to admit their actual ignorance. Accordingly, in the *Euthyphro*, it is essential that in the end, Euthyphro's actual ignorance be revealed. In other words, his determination rests upon a wrong or incomplete insight: he is prepared to see his father put to death for reasons of piety, without even knowing what piety is. That is what makes him immoderate.¹⁷

Hence, true Platonic piety is to be found, not in a pretension to know what the gods want me to do, but rather in an ultimate uncertainty that obliges me to be moderate. Of course, for Plato there are things about the gods that we know with certainty: we know, for instance, that they exist (*Laws* X), and that they are good and truth-loving (*Rep.* II); we also know (from the *Euthyphro* and *Laws* IV) that they are just, and that they want us to be just. In this way, we do have way-markers that show us the direction in which the divine – and hence also piety – must be sought. But our striving to comply with the gods' will can only be truly virtuous if it remains temperate, that is, if we acknowledge our final lack of knowledge about what pleases the gods. Therefore, the irony with which Socrates opposes Euthyphro's determination is the best and most pious reaction of all: at the end of the day, god remains the measure, and we can never be certain whether our action is exactly what the gods want us to do.

This conclusion does not signify that, after all, the core of piety lies in an epistemological issue, as if impiety were merely the result of a presumptuous claim to know what one actually does not know. It is rather the other way round: Euthyphro's presumption to be an expert in religious matters is in fact the result of an impious attitude. Despite his own argument that he follows a divine commandment, Euthyphro actually sets himself in the place of the gods. He takes himself to be the measure in religious matters, rather than observing moderation or temperance, and acknowledging that god is the measure of all things.

4 Becoming Like God

Euthyphro and the *Laws* indicate, each in its own way, that human beings must strive to do what pleases god. That is to say, we must become like god, as like is attracted by like. And since god is the measure of all things, as we have seen, we humans must observe moderation and humility (see *Laws* IV, 716c–d, quoted above, pp. 17–18).

¹⁷ In this way, Plato recovers the old notion of *hybris*: a human person's behaviour that is inappropriate because it assumes a position that a human cannot take. Plato moralizes this notion by linking it to the vice of intemperance.

This Platonic adage of ‘becoming like god’ (ὁμοίωσις θεῶ)¹⁸ hinges on the likeness that is acquired, in a model of imitation that Plato uses elsewhere to indicate the relation between god and mortal things. In the *Phaedrus*, every human person is said to be a follower of one specific god, and thus to reflect this god’s character:

So it is with each of the gods: everyone spends his life honoring the god in whose chorus he danced, and emulates that god in every way he can, so long as he remains undefiled and in his first life down here. (*Phdr.* 252d, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff)

The followers of a certain god will also choose their lovers accordingly:

They are well equipped to track down their god’s true nature with their own resources because of their driving need to gaze at the god, and as they are in touch with the god by memory they are inspired by him and adopt his customs and practices, so far as a human being can share a god’s life. [...] They take their god’s path and seek for their own a boy whose nature is like the god’s; and when they have got him they emulate the god, convincing the boy they love and training him to follow their god’s pattern and way of life, so far as is possible in each case. (*Phdr.* 252e–253b, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff)

This likeness to god constitutes a certain character and desire, but it also entails a distinct tendency to distance oneself from everyday life. In a famous passage from the *Theaetetus*, the difference is stressed between the lack of worldliness of philosophers and the shrewdness of rhetoricians and political *partouseurs*, the latter always being in the lead when it comes to defending their practical matters. Yet the naïve philosopher, who is the object of derision in practical affairs, busies himself with realities of a higher order than mere self-interest. And he is the only one who knows ‘how to strike up a song like a free man, or how to tune the strings of common speech to the fitting praise of the life of gods and of the happy among men’ (*Theaet.* 175e–176a, tr. M.J. Levett, rev. M. Burnyeat). From which Theodorus concludes that if Socrates’ words convinced everyone as they did him, ‘there would be more peace and less evil on earth’ (176a). Thus, the question is bent towards a discussion of how to escape from evil, to which Socrates replies as follows:

¹⁸ Cf. Jean-François Pradeau, ‘L’assimilation au dieu’, in Jérôme (ed.), *Les dieux de Platon*, pp. 41–52, and David Sedley, ‘“Becoming like God” in the *Timaeus* and Aristotle’, in Tomás Calvo and Luc Brisson (eds), *Interpreting the Timaeus-Critias: Proceedings of the IVth Symposium Platonicum*, International Plato Studies, 9 (Sankt Augustin, 1997), pp. 327–40.

But it is not possible, Theodorus, that evil should be destroyed – for there must always be something opposed to the good; nor is it possible that it should have its seat in heaven. But it must inevitably haunt human life, and prowl about this earth. That is why a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and escape means becoming as like God as possible; and a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pure, with understanding. (*Theaet.* 176a–b, tr. M.J. Levett, rev. M. Burnyeat)

Assimilation to god here means that one pursues virtue (becoming just and pure), with understanding. This takes up an argument from the *Phaedo*, where all the virtues are in some way reduced to wisdom as the universal currency:

For I suspect, my good Simmias, that for the purpose of virtue this is not the correct exchange, the exchanging of pleasures for pleasures, pains for pain and fear for fear, greater for less, like currencies, but that just one thing is the correct currency, in return for which one must exchange all these, namely wisdom, and that when all things are bought and sold for this and with this – with wisdom – they really are courage, temperance, justice and in sum true virtue, regardless of whether pleasures, fears and everything else like that are added or removed, but that when they are kept apart from wisdom and exchanged for one another, that sort of virtue is a kind of illusion, really fit for slaves, and contains nothing sound or true, whereas the reality is that temperance, justice and courage are a kind of purification from everything like this, and that wisdom itself is a kind of rite to purify us. (*Phaedo* 69a–c, tr. Sedley)¹⁹

Thus, wisdom is the basis of all virtues, and, equally importantly, it constitutes the *purification* of a wrong conception of virtue. It is this kind of purification that is envisaged in the philosophers' assimilation to god: instead of weighing one's interests and pursuing virtue for the sake of practical benefits, assimilation teaches one to strive for a realm in which the exchanges of everyday life are left behind. Then we reach true courage, temperance, justice and the other virtues. In the *Theaetetus*, this same idea is taken up when Socrates indicates that people need to escape from evil for the right reasons:

But it is not at all an easy matter, my good friend, to persuade men that it is not for the reasons commonly alleged that one should try to escape from wickedness and pursue virtue. It is not in order to avoid a bad reputation and obtain a good one that virtue should be practiced and not vice; that, it seems to me, is only what men call 'old wives' talk'. (*Theaet.* 176b–c, tr. M.J. Levett, rev. M. Burnyeat)

¹⁹ Cf. David Sedley, 'The unity of virtue after the *Protagoras*', forthcoming in Bernard Collette and Sylvain Delcomminette (eds), *Unité et origine des vertus dans la philosophie ancienne*, (Brussels).

The right reasons do not consist in avoiding punishment and disgrace, as common people hold, but rather in the happiness by which a life of true virtue is rewarded:

Let us try to put the truth in this way. In God there is no sort of wrong whatsoever; he is supremely just, and the thing most like him is the man who has become as just as it lies in human nature to be. And it is here that we see whether a man is truly able, or truly a weakling and a nonentity; for it is the realization of this that is genuine wisdom and goodness, while the failure to realize it is manifest folly and wickedness. Everything else that passes for ability and wisdom has a sort of commonness – in those who wield political power a poor cheap show, in the manual workers a matter of mechanical routine. [...] We must therefore tell them the truth – that their very ignorance of their true state fixes them the more firmly therein. For they do not know what is the penalty of injustice, which is the last thing of which a man should be ignorant. It is not what they suppose – scourging and death – things which they may entirely evade in spite of their wrongdoing. It is a penalty from which there is no escape. (*Theaet.* 176c–d, tr. M.J. Levett, rev. M. Burnyeat)

When asked what this penalty is, Socrates points out that those who cling to god partake in a divine and supremely happy state, whereas those who fail to do so fall back in deepest unhappiness. Wrongdoers do not understand this. By their lack of understanding they become less and less like god. The penalty is then, eventually, that ‘they will forever go on living in this world a life after their own likeness’ (*Theaet.* 177a).

Thus, again, understanding or wisdom is the basic line along which assimilation to god, and the purification that accompanies it, is defined. Does this mean, then, that assimilation to god *is* nothing but thought? In order to settle this question, we need to turn back to the passage from the *Laws* book IV (716c–d) where ‘being god’s friend’ is said to equal ‘being like god’, since god is the measure of all things. In his book on Plato’s theology, Michael Bordt holds that Plato wants to emphasize in this passage the idea that reason is the measure and norm of all things, the objective order of reason being identical with god.²⁰ The divine precept of the *Laws* would thus be nothing other than a commandment to follow reason, which ultimately comes down to ‘think god’s own thoughts’.²¹

I think that this interpretation misses the point being made in the passage in question. We shall have occasion to reflect on the (Aristotelian) presuppositions of Bordt’s overall interpretation in the third chapter. For our present purposes, it may suffice to point out that the idea that god is intellect (νοῦς), and hence, that assimilation to god is assimilation to intellect, is an Aristotelian one, and not what Plato is highlighting in the *Laws*. Even though, evidently, for Plato the

²⁰ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, Symposium, 126 (Munich, 2006), pp. 183–4.

²¹ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 184 fn. 70.

divine order is always linked to reason or intellect (νοῦς),²² – as we shall also discuss at length in Chapter 3 – and even though the assimilation to god requires that one follows the intellect, it would be hard to prove that, in the passages to which we are referring, Plato's ultimate goal would be to think god's thoughts. Quite the contrary: becoming like god is presented here as an acknowledgment of the fact that god, and god *alone*, is the measure of all things. One could then argue that this is the measure imposed by a divine intellect on our intellect – but still, the passages under consideration here intimate that such assimilation is never complete or pure. This is precisely what is meant by Plato's addition that we must 'do our level best to make our own character reflect that of god'.²³ The commandment, then, is not so much to become gods ourselves, but rather to aspire to become *as like* the gods *as possible*. The Platonic assimilation to god preserves an irreducible difference between gods and humans, based on the recognition that god, rather than humankind, is the measure of all things. Rather than confirming this, a full-fledged assimilation to god would go counter to what Plato's precept envisages; for if one takes oneself to be capable of divinisation, one becomes presumptuous, taking oneself as the norm rather than the divinity. And that is precisely what Plato wants to preclude in this passage.

This is made even clearer in the passage that follows the text we are discussing. At *Laws* IV, 716e–717a, Plato goes on to explain the consequences of the commandment by making a distinction between the one who is 'loved by god' (θεοφιλής) – and who is, on that ground alone, a 'good person' (ἀγαθός) – and the one who is impure, and hence evil (κακός). These are indeed qualifications of a moral and religious kind, rather than intellectual, which invalidates the thesis that assimilation to god would consist in achieving the highest noetic activity by thinking god's thoughts.

The commandment to become as like god as possible needs, then, to be complemented by the precept to instantiate a moral attitude, enacted in justice and temperance,²⁴ which entails that one accommodate oneself to the law and measure of the divine. Thus, the pursuit of wisdom and purification as elaborated in *Phaedo* and *Theaetetus* needs to be coupled with Plato's emphasis

²² Cf. Luc Brisson, 'La critique de la tradition religieuse par Platon, et son usage dans la *République* et dans les *Lois*', in Eugénie Vegleris (ed.), *Cosmos et psychè. Mélanges offerts à Jean Frère* (Hildesheim-Zurich-New York, 2005), pp. 67–82 and Stephen Menn, *Plato on God as Nous* (Carbondale, 1995), *passim*.

²³ *Laws* IV, 716c (εις δύναμιν ὅτι μάλιστα καὶ αὐτὸν τοιοῦτον ἀναγκαῖον γίνεσθαι). This is an important qualification, which is also prominent in *Theaetetus* 176b ('so far as is possible', κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν), *Phdr.* 253a ('in so far as a human being is capable of partaking in the divine', καθ' ὅσον δυνατόν θεοῦ ἀνθρώπῳ μετασχεῖν) and b ('according to each one's capability', ὅση ἐκάστω δυνάμει), *Symp.* 207d ('the mortal nature seeks to become eternal and immortal in so far as possible, ἡ θνητὴ φύσις ζητεῖ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν αἰετὲ εἶναι καὶ ἀθάνατος) and *Rep.* X, 619a ('so far as is possible', κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν).

²⁴ Also in the *Theaetetus*, the assimilation to god is combined with justice, and with virtue in general; cf. Pradeau, 'L'assimilation au dieu', pp. 43–5.

on taking god as the measure in the *Laws* Book IV. The virtue that is required of good people is not just 'wisdom' or 'understanding' (φρόνησις), but indeed 'temperance' (σωφροσύνη); this is founded on wisdom, but with the addition of a supplementary quality (one that implies the presence of piety). By this virtue of temperance, humans recognize their own lack of measure, or even their own immoderation, and accept the requirement to respect the divine measure. The acknowledgement of this heteronomy (or the commandment to abide by this external law) is the necessary prerequisite for a religious attitude. So, rather than inciting people to think god's thoughts, *Laws* IV, 716c–d wants to emphasize the close links between the divine measure and morality. In this context, Plato's usage of the dictum that like is attracted by like has primarily a moral and religious meaning, not an intellectual one.

Chapter 2

Plato's Theology

1 Introduction

The Greek pantheon consisted of a plethora of gods whose existence was closely bound to natural phenomena, whether they were universal (weather, seasons, the sun) or local (trees, springs, caves, etc.). Contrary to what might be taken as obvious, however, Greek religion is not a mere natural religion. The Greeks did not worship natural phenomena as such, nor did they venerate personifications of such natural phenomena. Their gods are thoroughly anthropomorphic; they have their own character and whims, their own personality and desires, as laid down by the poets. Thus, they are much less fathomable than mere natural forces. Their deeds are unpredictable, their reactions undetermined. Although the gods are not masters of fate – they are themselves subject to fate's decisions – they have their own free choice, their desires, pride and pity, which make them hard to please.¹

This description primarily fits the Olympian gods, apart from which there were of course a great number of chthonic and natural divinities: naiads, dryads, nymphs, and so forth. These were indeed personified natural forces, although even in this case, Greek anthropomorphism, and hence a distancing from purely natural religion, had already modified the attitude towards them. The chthonic divinities and heroes were also depicted in anthropomorphic terms, even though they were always more or less local, and certainly less powerful than the Olympians, who were worshipped throughout the Greek world. This situation was probably the result of a syncretistic attempt to reconcile the local deities of a limited sedentary community with the broader religious beliefs shared by all the nomadic Greek invaders who took control of the land from 2000 BC onwards. This evolution was echoed in the stories of battles and struggles between the Olympians and different kinds of heroes, half-gods or deities, often earth-born (like the Titans, the Giants, etc.). The Olympian gods, originally representing natural forces themselves, were gradually detached from this direct representation and came to resemble human persons. Hence, the Olympians came to live in a palace (Mount Olympus), living immortally in the image and likeness of the mortals who worshipped them.

This situation, authoritatively described by Homer and later institutionalized in Greek society (through religious practice, through rhapsodic recitation, or through reading Homer from childhood), was in fact a very precarious one. It was built on a tension between different functions of the divine (cosmological, natural, anthropological and moral) which were hard to reconcile, but which were kept

¹ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge MA, 1985), pp. 305–11.

together by anthropomorphic descriptions of the gods' unfathomable motivations and actions.

However influential this Homeric picture of the gods may have been, these underlying tensions kept coming to the fore, while various attempts were made at solving them. In broad outline, one can discern two major tensions (and tendencies to resolve them) that jeopardized the traditional Homeric point of view.

The first tension is that between cosmology and anthropomorphism. The initial detachment of anthropomorphic gods from nature came at a price: it was fuel to a new concept of nature, elaborated by a new type of poet who wanted to explain the divine universe as a φύσις, that is, as a force of growth that produces and reproduces itself without any super-natural intervention.² The natural philosophers thus undermined the received stories about the gods' role in the universe, and came up with new accounts of the 'divine' principles that inhere in nature.

In this vein, it is hard to reconcile the natural forces and powers with the whimsical Olympians. Yet, by and large, when Plato was writing the Olympians *were* still regarded as divine forces in the universe. They instigate the movement of the heavens and represent the order of the cosmos. Thus, for instance, the planets were named after Olympian gods, Zeus was regarded as the governor of the universe,³ and so forth.⁴

It is hard to appreciate how the Greeks dealt with this tension. In any case, it gave rise to a growing tendency to endorse an 'astral theology', that is to say, to worship the Olympians as the celestial bodies (or at least, as the souls that animate these celestial bodies).⁵ And with this shift underway, one could predict that the Olympians would lose their anthropomorphic traits.

The second tension is that between anthropomorphism and (moral) perfection. This gave rise to a tendency to stress the gods' moral integrity, and hence, to an observable trend towards a moralized view of the gods. This is not so much a path that leads away from anthropomorphism as a reaction to ignoble versions of it – one that accuses Homer and the other poets of having attributed false or bad character traits to the gods. The old Homeric stories were criticized for

² Cf. Francis M. Cornford, *Before and After Socrates* (Cambridge, 1932), p. 8.

³ As in Plato's *Phaedrus*, *Philebus* and *Laws*: cf. Conrado Eggers-Lan, 'Zeus e anima del mondo nel *Fedro* (246e–253c)', in Livio Rossetti (ed.), *Understanding the Phaedrus: Proceedings of the IInd Symposium Platonicum*, International Plato Studies, 1. (Sankt Augustin, 1992), pp. 40–46, who focuses on the account in the *Phaedrus*. See also Burkert, *Greek Religion*, pp. 318–19.

⁴ Take, for instance, Sophocles' divinization of *aither*, *Oed. Rex* 863–872; cf. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 318.

⁵ There is an interesting question as to whether the twelve gods mentioned in Plato's *Phaedrus* are to be understood as the planets and the fixed stars. Plato's account is not unequivocal; see, e.g. Eggers-Lan, 'Zeus e anima del mondo', pp. 40–46, who denies the identification, as opposed to, among others, W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods* (London, 1950). Yet at the time of Calcidius (third or fourth century AD), the case is settled: the twelve gods are in fact the celestial bodies (Calc., *In Tim.* 206.14ff.).

representing the gods as immoral, quarrelsome, unjust and adulterous individuals. Like the Mycenaean warlords, the gods of Homer and Hesiod were allowed to do whatever they wanted, to impose their arbitrary decisions, without threat of being punished. Should they be taken as the guides and examples for the young? In the late sixth and early fifth centuries BC, the poet Xenophanes denies Homer's and Hesiod's authority in religious matters, on the charge that

Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is a shame and reproach among men, stealing and committing adultery and deceiving each other. (Xenophanes, fr. 11, tr. Kirk and Raven)

With his further remark that different peoples worship gods in their own likeness – or their own likeness in gods⁶ – Xenophanes questions anthropomorphism altogether. In its stead, he introduces a divinity who is 'in no way similar to mortals either in body or in thought' (fr. 23).

Xenophanes remains an exception in the sense that his rejection of anthropomorphism was never commonly accepted. At the same time, however, his analysis is emblematic of changing opinions during the fifth century BC. The reaction against Homer's licentious gods became more and more widespread. The gods retained their essentially human shapes, but they were portrayed in an increasingly austere and lofty way, without any sign of maliciousness or evil. The view that gradually came to the fore held the gods to be good and perfect: they were exemplars of moral conduct who were never led by dark motivations.

Now, the two tendencies that arose from the tensions described here are mutually exclusive: an understanding of gods as perfect moral actors can hardly be compatible with an understanding of gods as celestial bodies. Nevertheless, these tendencies did appear side-by-side in nearly all Greek authors of the fifth and fourth centuries BC.⁷ This is partly due the fact that these two tendencies, despite their differences, rely on similar or identical explanatory principles. 'Reason' (λόγος), for instance, is an important element in the explanation of both the cosmic order and the morality of the gods. The same can be said of the term 'intellect' (νοῦς), which contains in a nutshell the evolution of Greek religious attitudes. In Homeric times, the word 'νοῦς' was used to indicate the 'leadership' of the gods, but also their whims. In philosophical explanations, the term was used to indicate the intellect that governs the order of the universe (as in Anaxagoras), while at the

⁶ Xenophanes fr. 16: 'The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair.' (tr. Kirk and Raven).

⁷ Thus, for instance, Xenophanes' reaction against immoral depictions of the gods (tendency 2) goes together with a description of the single, non-anthropomorphic god as 'always remaining in the same place, moving not at all ... without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind' (fr. 26+25, revealing tendency 1).

same time being used to indicate the 'wisdom' and 'thoughtfulness' of the morally good person.⁸ Hence, *voũç* could be ascribed to the gods in both contexts.

All of these elements reveal the enormous complexity of Greek religion in the late fifth and early fourth centuries BC. The cause of this complexity lies not so much in the number of gods and divine forces, nor in the precise determination of their functions or domains, but rather in the tensions between different conceptions of religion and theology. The absence of a generally accepted creed or a standard account of the divine – even a generally accepted set of 'sacred texts' – of course did little to help the situation. The old standard model, as laid down by Homer and Hesiod, had ceased to function, yet it was not replaced by any authoritative account. Various new religious currents became fashionable (like Orphism,⁹ Mystery cults, and oriental rites entering Greece), each answering to religious needs in their own way.¹⁰ Many philosophers, from their part, tried to give a rational account of reality in which cosmology and theology were held together, while at the same time arguing that the divine order entails perfect morality.

A possible escape from the tensions involved in Greek religion was to deny the gods' existence altogether, or to deny that they relate to our world. Indeed, a striking, though marginal, feature of fifth-century Greek religious culture was the emergence of atheism. The reasons behind this atheism are not easily understood, as the evidence is lacking. It may have risen out of questions of theodicy, out of a heightened awareness that images and representations of the gods are culturally specific, or out of the recognition that the existence of the gods surpasses the limits of human knowledge, thus giving rise to an agnosticism in religious affairs.¹¹ It could certainly also arise from a 'scientific' (natural-philosophical) approach to explanations of the universe, as in the case of Anaxagoras, who declared that 'the planets are fiery stones'.¹² Thus, we could – at least in part – consider this type of

⁸ See, for instance, Anaxagoras' pupil Diogenes of Apollonia, who holds that intellect (*voũç*) is air, as the finest substance, identical with Zeus, and that this intellect extends to humans who thus 'possess a small portion of god' (Fr. A 19, § 42 D-K).

⁹ As proven by the Derveni papyrus, Orphism was confessed as early as the beginning of the fourth century BC.

¹⁰ For instance, the author of the Derveni papyrus uses allegorical explanations of the gods and their deeds (as described by Orpheus), in order to bring them in accordance with (Anaxagorean) cosmology, and to retrieve a message of purified piety from them; see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, pp. 320–21. See also Gábor Betegh, *The Derveni Papyrus. Cosmology, Theology and Interpretation* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 182–205.

¹¹ The latter is the case of Protagoras (fr. 4) whose agnosticism seems to be based on his theory of knowledge, as expounded in Plato's *Theaetetus* (160d–179d). Plato explains Protagoras' *homo mensura* as saying that my perception is the measure of the existence of things. That is to say, there are no steady and fixed objects in the world; the nature of things depends on how I perceive them (*Theaet.* 166b–168c). That would then explain how the existence of the gods cannot be argued for in a decisive way; for, as long as they are not perceived, Protagoras cannot affirm their existence.

¹² Diog. Laërt. II 7.

Greek atheism to be a radical solution to the tension between cosmology and the traditional view of the gods.

However tolerant Greek religion may have been towards different expressions of religious practice, atheism was not officially countenanced: running into an accusation of impiety (γραφὴ ἀσεβείας) meant a serious risk of being sentenced to death. Yet these accusations were infrequent, and most of the Athenian cases we know are situated in a specific period of time. It seems that the emergence of atheism went together with the openness of mind in fifth-century Athens. In the early fourth century, once the sophistic movement has come to an end, we also witness a decreasing number of accusations for impiety. This does not necessarily mean that society became more tolerant. It is, rather, a sign of the contrary: namely that deviating features like atheism were fading, and that a restoration of religion (in all its multifariousness) was underway.¹³

Nevertheless, atheism and agnosticism left their traces: at very least, the Greek theoretical reflection on the gods has been influenced by it. Plato, for one, always stresses the ultimate lack of knowledge about the gods, as we shall see; but at the same time, he fiercely argues against those who would explain the order of the universe as the effect of mere chance-occurrences in matter. In the *Laws* Book X, Plato makes the Athenian launch some criticisms against the old poets, whose antiquity makes them hard to rebuke, even though their moral inferences about the gods are of a rather low standard. Yet the Athenian is much more severe when it comes to the new-fashioned ideas of his fellow countrymen:

In Athens a number of written works are current which are not found in your states (which are, I understand, too well run to tolerate them). The subject of these writings (some of which are in verse, others in prose) is theology. [... follows the criticism of ancient poets as paraphrased above]. Still, there is no need to bother with this old material: we may freely allow it to be arranged and recounted in any way the gods find amusing. But the principles of our modern pundits do need to be denounced as a pernicious influence. Just look at the effects of their arguments! When you and I present our proofs for the existence of gods and adduce what you adduced – sun, moon, stars and earth – and argue they are gods and divine beings, the proselytes of these clever fellows will say that these things are just earth and stones, and are incapable of caring for human affairs, however much our plausible rhetoric has managed to dress them up. (*Laws* X, 886b–e, tr. T.J. Saunders)

In this way, Plato introduces his most elaborate account of the gods' existence, which we shall study in detail in the next chapter. Meanwhile, it may have become

¹³ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, pp. 316–17 and p. 321: 'The intellectual revolution ends in a conservative attitude'. See also the entry 'asebeias graphē', in August Friedrich Pauly and Georg Wissowa (eds), *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Bd. II, 2 (Stuttgart: Metzler), 1896.

clear that Plato's refutation of atheism is directed against those who held incorrect cosmological positions (like Anaxagoras and Democritus, who are clearly targeted here), basing their accounts on a hazardous explanation of the material constituents of the universe. As we shall see, Plato will replace their views with an argument that the obvious existence of order needs to be explained, not taken for granted, and that any order is issued by divine soul.

It is interesting to see how Plato distinguishes these 'modern pundits' from the older poets. The poets' expressions may have been wrong or old-fashioned – based, that is, on outdated cosmological views – but their stories may nevertheless be recounted 'in any way the gods find amusing'. Though they are no longer to be followed as setting the standard for religious belief, they were at least not denying the existence of the gods. It is apparently this feature that distinguishes them from the modernists, and makes them less pernicious.

Thus, Plato makes the reaction against atheism his own, and enters the debate over theology with a clear agenda: to safeguard the existence of the gods, even within a newly established cosmology. Moreover, Plato will argue that the gods must be examples of the highest moral standing, warranting the order of justice and rebuking human misbehaviour.

By doing so, Plato fully endorses the complexity of early fourth-century theology, with the tensions and hardly compatible tendencies that inhere in it. As we will try to show in this and the following chapter, these tendencies are held together in Plato's writings by his endeavour to bring any account of the gods under the single heading of the *good*, which is the ultimate principle both of morality and of the movement and structure of the cosmos.

In this chapter, we shall investigate Plato's 'speaking about the gods', or *θεολογία* (*Rep.* II, 379a) – a word which, as far as we know, Plato is the first ever to have used. And it is clear in most contexts that Plato speaks this way only hesitantly – a feature of his theology that will require proper attention. But when he is more affirmative (for instance, in the second book of the *Republic*), Plato does hold clear views on the gods' being good and trustworthy. These essential features of his theology will be coupled with other characteristics that Plato attributes to the gods – their existence as souls being the most important one – in view of an asymmetry between Platonic theology and metaphysics which we want to explore in the next chapter.

2 Plato's Hesitation in Speaking about the Gods

Plato's clear affirmation of the gods' existence and goodness does not mean that he has no doubts when 'speaking about the gods'. Quite the contrary: he is always very cautious in doing so. More often than not, he will add that our discourse is deficient, and that the gods themselves should be the final judges of the matter at hand.

Plato's hesitation to make positive statements on the nature of the gods has been highlighted many times in Platonic studies, although it has not always

received an adequate place in the hermeneutics of his theology, specifically. This expression of doubt is often remarked, only to then be hastily dismissed as some kind of Platonic play with no importance for a correct understanding of what Plato's theology is about.¹⁴

In the *Cratylus*, when Socrates and Hermogenes decide to discuss the etymology of the names of the gods, Socrates expresses his caution in the following way:

The first and finest line of investigation, which as intelligent people we must acknowledge, is this, that we admit that we know nothing about the gods themselves or about the names they call themselves – although it is clear that they call themselves by true ones. The second best line on the correctness of names is to say, as is customary in our prayers, that we hope the gods are pleased by the names we give them, since we know no others. I think it is an excellent custom. (*Cratylus* 400d, tr. C.D.C. Reeve)

This lack of knowledge in matters divine, and the reference to a customary formula when addressing the gods – one *hopes* to have called them by the right names and epithets – are as many indications of the impossibility of discussing divine matters in a sufficient way. This difficulty is then surmounted, in the *Cratylus*, by the claim that our investigation into the origins of the divine names says nothing about the gods themselves, but rather about our human understanding when we attribute those names to the gods:

So, if it's all right with you, let's begin our investigation by first announcing to the gods that we will not be investigating *them* – since we do not regard ourselves as worthy to conduct such an investigation – but rather human beings, and the beliefs they had in giving the gods their names. After all, there's no offense in doing that. (*Crat.* 401a, tr. C.D.C. Reeve)

The *Philebus* likewise attests to this reverence for divine names, when Socrates indicates that the discussion of the role of pleasure in the good life has to start with a correct invocation of the goddess Aphrodite:

¹⁴ Thus, e.g., Luc Brisson, *Le même et l'autre dans la structure ontologique du Timée de Platon. Un commentaire systématique du Timée de Platon* (Paris, 1974), p. 105 and 478, who indicates (at *Tim.* 40d–e) that Plato is mocking the traditional poets who think they can provide a direct account of the divine. Francis Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology. The Timaeus of Plato translated with a running commentary* (London, 1937), pp. 138–9 also argues that this hesitation only concerns the anthropomorphic presentation of the traditional gods, not, however, the celestial gods, which we can see. This may well be the case, but it would then only be a statement about the representations of the gods, not about the nature of the divine – thus leaving open the question of how the traditional gods ought to be conceived of: cf. Filip Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos: Untersuchungen zur Kosmologie, Seelenlehre und Theologie in Platons Phaidon und Timaios*, Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, 199 (Munich and Leipzig, 2004), p. 141.

Socrates: We must do our best, making our start with the goddess herself – this fellow claims that though she is called Aphrodite her truest name is pleasure.

Protarchus: Certainly.

Socrates: I always feel a more than human dread over what names to use for the gods – it surpasses the greatest fear. So I now address Aphrodite by whatever title pleases her. (*Philebus* 12b–c, tr. D. Frede)

This passage is a perfect echo of what was pointed out in the *Cratylus*: the cautious attitude (or indeed fear) towards the gods is complemented by the attempt to please – or not to displease – them by using the right names. In the *Philebus* this includes a piece of irony against Protarchus' and Philebus' hedonistic claims to divinize pleasure, but it also reveals an attitude of piety, one which refrains from imposing our own predilections and endeavours onto the gods. In the context of cult, to which Plato is here making an allusion, this attitude was expressed by heaping up the gods' epithets, and/or by replacing a straightforward address to a god (using a certain name or epithet) by a formula of the kind we find here ('by whatever title pleases her'), leaving it up to the gods to decide the name by which they want to be called.¹⁵

This hesitation also occurs when, in the *Timaeus*, the cosmogonic story is referred to as a likely myth, on account of its subject matter being a likeness itself (29b–c), and on account of the shortcomings of our human knowledge:

Don't be surprised then, Socrates, if it turns out repeatedly that we won't be able to produce accounts on a great many subjects – on gods or the coming to be of the universe – that are completely and perfectly consistent and accurate. Instead, if we can come up with accounts no less likely than any, we ought to be content, keeping in mind that both I, the speaker, and you, the judges, are only human. So we should accept the likely tale on these matters. It behoves us not to look for anything beyond this. (*Tim.* 29c–d, tr. D.J. Zeyl)

Thus, our being 'only human' is given as an excuse for the inaccuracies of the account, when we are talking about the gods or about the coming to be of the cosmos. There are other elements in the *Timaeus* that confirm this. Timaeus displays a particularly cautious attitude towards the traditional gods. Before introducing the 'old gods', he expresses the following caveat:

¹⁵ Cf. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 73 with fn. 17; except for one (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 160), Burkert's examples are all taken from Plato, only two of which are using the formula with reference to the divine names: the texts we discussed here (*Crat.* 400e and *Phil.* 12c); *Phdr.* 273c adapts the formula to address the rhetorician Tisias, while *Tim.* 28b applies it to finding a good name for the universe. This allusive usage may be seen, however, as a confirmation of the fact that this formula was well recognized by Plato's readers as part of the practice of praying.

As for the other wondrous beings (δαίμονες), it is beyond our task to know and speak of how they came to be. We should accept on faith the assertions of those figures of the past who claimed to be the offspring of gods. They must surely have been well informed about their own ancestors. So we cannot avoid believing the children of gods, even though their accounts lack plausible and compelling proofs. Rather, we should follow custom and believe them, on the ground that what they claim to be reporting are matters of their own concern. Accordingly, let us accept their account of how these gods came to be and state what it is. (*Tim.* 40d–e, tr. D.J. Zeyl)

Even though the accounts of the ancient theologians lack demonstrative force, Timaeus states that he cannot do any better – we should simply accept their assertions: that Okeanos and Thetys are the offspring of Heaven and Earth, and so on. This means that the gods came into existence by a union (of heaven and earth) that took place within the Living Thing (the universe, composed by the mixture of the four elements). That is to say, the gods came to be in a pre-existent order, ordained by intellect (νοῦς). Yet the details of Timaeus' theogony are not explained, as this appears to be beyond the reach of any narrative on cosmology.

Other examples of this hesitation are to be found in texts discussed elsewhere in this book: at *Phaedrus* 246b–d, where a possible definition of 'god' is concluded with the phrase, 'but of course we must let this be as it may please the gods, and speak accordingly' (discussed below, pp. 46–7). Or again, Platonic texts on the lawgiver's refraining from interfering with religion (*Rep.* IV, 427b–e and *Laws* III, 679b–c, discussed above, pp. 6–8) may be taken as examples of a particular caution.¹⁶

I believe this hesitation or reticence must be given full weight. Plato is by no means an atheist, but he is extremely conscious of the need to talk about the gods in an appropriate way, which would mean that a truly correct account of the gods could only be given from the perspective of the gods themselves.¹⁷ Thus, Plato is very much aware of the limits of our understanding when it comes to grasping their true nature. We do not have the tools, or so it seems, to discuss the divine as it is in itself. Hence we stumble around in these matters, and, as Plato often says, should respect the authority of those people who, long before our days, lived closer to the gods, and hence could give a better explanation of their ancestors' nature.¹⁸ That is to say, the traditional way of speaking about the gods is not entirely discarded. Rather, it is accepted *faute de mieux*. As long as we have no better alternative, we had better remain faithful to the ancient stories.

¹⁶ Cf. also *Critias* 107a–b.

¹⁷ A parallel can be drawn with the *Parmenides*' statement that a true account of the Forms can only be given if one takes the perspective of the gods, i.e., viewing the Forms as they are in themselves. This perspective is excluded for human beings, as the *Parmenides* makes clear (*Parm.* 134b–e).

¹⁸ See, e.g. *Phil.* 16c–d (reference to the Pythagoreans).

This hesitation should be read in close connection with Plato's analysis in *Laws* Book IV, which points out that ultimately, god is the measure of all things, and that humans ought to observe modesty and moderation in order to please god. As we have seen, this relies also on an epistemological argument: that we cannot claim to know what the god wants us to do. This problem also underlies Plato's reluctance to give a straightforward and unproblematic description of matters divine. That is to say, Plato's hesitation in speaking about the gods is to be read within the framework of a definition of piety that does not allow him to hold self-conceited opinions about the gods. Suspension of judgement about the gods is, thus, not an expression of doubt or agnosticism, but rather the outcome of an intrinsically pious attitude.

Yet this hesitation in speaking about the gods has an important corollary: it opens the way to questioning many inferences about the poets' gods. In a great many instances, the traditional stories about the gods miss the divine entirely. Many theological views are erroneous, or should at least not be taken literally, since they represent the gods in a human, all-too-human shape.

Plato's reaction against the poets takes its roots in this kind of reflection. The poets have passed down an anthropomorphic view of the gods, and have ascribed immoral motifs and passions to them – thus 'divinizing' acts and behaviour that would be repudiated and punished among human beings.

This opens the way to two questions: first, which instances of theology are to be repudiated, and which are correct? And, second, what to think of the traditional gods? Are they discarded along with the poets' anthropomorphic accounts, or does Plato integrate them into his theology – and if so, what is the relation between the traditional gods and Plato's other divinities? We shall treat those questions in the subsequent sections, where we shall also attempt to unravel the different aspects of Plato's theology: the gods' condition of existence, their essential characteristics and the extent of the Platonic pantheon.

3 'Gods' or 'the God'?

Before dealing with the contents of Plato's theology, we should address some terminological issues. It may have become obvious that in Plato's texts, the gods are referred to in both the plural (*θεοί*) and the singular (*ὁ θεός*). It will be important, then, to understand this alternation, and the ideas that lie behind it, before jumping to conclusions concerning Plato's theology. (Is it monotheistic, as the singular seems to suggest? or does Plato remain faithful to the tradition of Greek polytheism?) Moreover, there is a clear difference in meaning between Plato's use of the adjective *θεῖος* ('divine', 'god-like') and the noun *θεός* ('god'), which will have its consequences for our appreciation of his theology.

3.1 'God' (Θεός) and 'God-like' (Θεῖος)

Taking the latter issue first, we may rely on a detailed study by Jean Van Camp and Paul Canart, who indicate that the range of use of the adjective θεῖος ('divine' or 'god-like') in Plato is not coextensive with its substantive counterpart. As they argue, Plato uses the word θεῖος in three different senses, which they epitomize as (1) an 'ordinary etymological and hyperbolic sense'; (2) a meaning that refers to divine inspiration; and (3) a philosophical meaning.¹⁹

1. In its ordinary etymological or hyperbolic sense, the word θεῖος is used to indicate anything that has to do with the traditional religion, but also anything that is unexpected, unexplained or extraordinary, without even for that matter meaning that the subject referred to is a god.²⁰
2. The second meaning is derived from the first one, referring to the divine possession that produces inspired poetry or clairvoyance. As Van Camp and Canart indicate, Plato never elaborates this theme in its religious aspects, nor does he give a philosophical theory of inspiration, even though he does transpose the qualification to philosophical matters (e.g. by calling the philosopher divinely possessed by the Forms, as at *Phdr.* 244a).²¹
3. In a philosophical meaning, the word θεῖος refers to a vast number of elements in the Platonic universe, which all have the quality of being intelligible (the Forms, the Model, etc.) or of being in contact with the intelligible (the philosopher, the soul, the gods). Van Camp and Canart argue that in all of these occurrences, the use of the word is always brought back to its original etymological or hyperbolic meaning. That is to say, θεῖος in this sense never became an independent technical term: 'θεῖος does not have a philosophical *content*, but rather a philosophical *function*'.²² This means, I take it, that Plato was always aware of the metaphorical use he made of the term when applying it to the elements of his philosophical system. That the Forms, for instance, are called 'divine' is a description that indicates their special ontological status, or their high value in explaining the world, but not that they are themselves gods.²³

¹⁹ Jean Van Camp and Paul Canart, *Le sens du mot θεῖος chez Platon*. Université de Louvain. Recueil de travaux d'histoire et de philologie, 4^{ème} série, fasc. 9. Leuven, 1956), pp. 412–23. Cf. pp. 173–7. This monograph provides many examples of these different meanings throughout the dialogues.

²⁰ Thus, e.g., *Rep.* I, 331e; VI, 500c–e: 'a god-like man' (θεῖος ἀνὴρ).

²¹ Van Camp and Canart, *Le sens du mot θεῖος*, p. 414; also pp. 103–04.

²² Van Camp and Canart, *Le sens du mot θεῖος*, p. 416: 'Θεῖος n'a pas de contenu philosophique, mais plutôt un rôle philosophique.'

²³ Van Camp and Canart, *Le sens du mot θεῖος*, p. 421: 'Nous pouvons affirmer avec certitude que, si les Idées sont fréquemment appelées 'divines', ce n'est pas en se fondant sur cette dénomination qu'on peut leur attribuer la place et le rôle de Dieu suprême chez Platon. Le sens relatif de θεῖος, toujours dans le prolongement du sens banal, ne permet pas

This analysis may suffice to show that a study of the word θεῖος is not the best point of access in seeking to understand Plato's theology. This is not unimportant, as it reveals that the 'divine' realm Plato explores in his ontology and metaphysics is not necessarily (and probably not at all) the place to look for his gods.²⁴

3.2 'God' (Θεός) or 'Gods' (Θεοί)?

It takes only a brief encounter with Plato's reflection on the gods to notice that he constantly and without apparent difficulty switches between the singular and plural form of the word θεός ('god'). One might be tempted to read into this a certain monotheistic tendency, thus giving weight to the presence of the singular form as a reference to a single or supreme divine being. Some interpreters have proposed explanations of this on the basis of a systematic interpretation of Plato's theology. Matthias Baltes, for instance, argued that in the *Timaeus* this alternation can be explained by accepting that the many different gods (referred to in the plural) are in fact identical with the one single god, the Demiurge.²⁵ We shall postpone discussion of the metaphysical fundamentals of this kind of interpretation until the next chapter. As to Baltes' suggestion specifically, Filip Karfik has made it clear that this neat explanation is not in fact supported by the wording of the *Timaeus*.²⁶

Yet things are far more (or less, depending on where one stands) complicated than that. The choice for the plural or singular is not led by the number of referents intended. At some places (like *Timaeus* 46c) the singular refers to 'all gods', while at others the plural is used to indicate 'every single god'. The two forms are for the most part interchangeable.²⁷ Sometimes the plural form of the verb referring

d'établir l'existence d'une nature divine, dont émaneraient, par voie de création ou même de participation, les différents êtres.' Cf. Michael Bordt, *Platons Theologie* (Munich, 2006), pp. 91–2, who does not agree, however, that the Forms would have ontological priority over God or the Intellect of God. For a more extensive discussion of Bordt's thesis, see below, pp. 75–81.

²⁴ Contra Karfik *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, pp. 135–8, who argues, even though he does not settle the question (as it might all be metaphorical language), that the use of the word θεῖος is more significant than the noun θεός, and, hence, that the qualification of the Forms as 'divine' may be an indication of their being the highest divinity. For a discussion of Karfik's views, see below, pp. 84–6.

²⁵ Matthias Baltes, 'Ἐγένεον [Platon, *Tim.* 28b7]. Ist die Welt real entstanden oder nicht?', in Keimpe A. Algra, Pieter W. van der Horst and David T. Runia (eds), *Polyhistor. Studies in the History and Historiography of Ancient Philosophy. Presented to Jaap Mansfeld on his Sixtieth Birthday*, *Philosophia Antiqua*, 72 (Leiden, 1996), pp. 76–96.

²⁶ Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, p. 115, who nevertheless opts (p. 116) for a rather unlikely solution, namely that the plural refers to the demiurgy provided by the planets and the earth, whereas the singular takes demiurgy as a whole.

²⁷ See, e.g., *Apol.* 35d; *Symp.* 202e–203a; *Laws* X, 900c–903a; *Phaedo* 62b–d, 106d. Gilbert François, *Le Polythéisme et l'emploi au singulier des mots ΘΕΟΣ, ΔΑΙΜΩΝ dans la littérature grecque de Homère à Platon* (Paris, 1957), p. 300 fn. 2, lists many more examples.

to the gods is taken up by a singular form within the same sentence.²⁸ Moreover, instances of the singular form are so diverse that one cannot suppose that the word is always referring to the same single divinity.

As the variation between plural and singular forms can thus be shown to be independent of the referents of Plato's word θεός, one needs to look for another reason why he had no difficulties alternating between the two forms. W.K.C. Guthrie suggested that this means that the singular form has a collective meaning.²⁹ About the same time, Gilbert François conducted research into the matter in Greek literature from Homer to Plato, and came to a similar conclusion: there is no significant difference between the plural and the singular form of ὁ θεός, and this is not even typical of Plato:

In our opinion, the multiplicity of the gods was an idea that was so indubitable to the Greeks, and, moreover, the word θεός was so commonly used in the singular with a collective value, that, even in the dialogues where he gives it a very particular sense, Plato, as a matter of logic, did not see any reason to differ from this lively tradition.³⁰

François does distinguish, however, between a 'collective' use and a 'generic' use. The most obvious explanation is thus that ὁ θεός is a collective term, by which 'all gods' ('l'ensemble des dieux, autrement dit le monde divin, le ciel') are indicated under the heading of 'god'. The 'generic' use is more precise. In this sense, ὁ θεός refers to the genus of the gods: 'the divine seen as a type representing the class (*all that is god*)'.³¹ François adds that the latter sense rarely intrudes itself in Plato.³² He seems to be holding to this view in reaction to Bovet's interpretation,³³ according to which the generic use of ὁ θεός is firmly in place, since Plato identifies the supreme god with self-thinking thought.³⁴ François is certainly right that Bovet's reading cannot hold water, as the Ideas are referred to

²⁸ Thus, e.g., *Timaeus* 71a (cf. François, *Le Polythéisme*, p. 276 fn. 1); *Laws* X, 893b; *Parm.* 134d–e; *Rep.* II 381c; *Tim.* 92a. See François, *Le Polythéisme*, p. 300 fn. 3.

²⁹ W.K.C. Guthrie, *In the Beginning: Some Greek Views on the Origins of Life and the Early State of Man* (Ithaca NY, 1957), p. 88 fn. 10 [p. 141].

³⁰ François, *Le Polythéisme*, p. 280: 'A notre avis, la pluralité des dieux était pour les Grecs une notion si peu contestable et, de plus, le mot θεός était si communément employé au singulier avec une valeur collective que, même dans les dialogues, où il lui a donné un sens très particulier, Platon n'a pas cru devoir, par souci de logique, se détacher d'une tradition bien vivante.' (author's translation).

³¹ François, *Le Polythéisme*, p. 17: 'l'être divin envisagé comme type représentatif du genre (*tout dieu*)' (author's translation).

³² François, *Le Polythéisme*, p. 300 fn. 1.

³³ Pierre Bovet, *Le dieu de Platon d'après l'ordre chronologique des dialogues* (Geneva and Paris, 1902), pp. 48–51, p. 113 fn. 5, p. 147 fn. 1.

³⁴ Bovet, *Le dieu de Platon*, pp. 160–65. In the next chapter, we shall discuss similar claims involved in recent interpretations.

as divine ('θεῖα'), not as 'god(s)'. Yet the generic meaning may still find a good range of application in Plato, when taken in a broader sense. In fact, as a generic qualification, ὁ θεός becomes an attributive noun with an adjectival meaning: it contains the description of what it is to be (a) god. This use can be compared to that of the word 'soul', which may refer to 'all that is soul', that is, signalling a generic description of 'soul' without for that matter denying the plurality of the various 'souls'. In the same way, 'god' as a singular noun does not refer to one sole god, but rather describes all of the gods in their essential features. This conclusion will prove to be important. As we shall see, the essential features of the Platonic gods include the conviction that they are individual souls, endowed with intellect (νοῦς), who bestow the order of the intelligible world and of goodness upon the sensible realm. Rather than reserve this qualification to one single divinity, Plato's use of the singular form distributes it over all possible referents of the word θεός.

4 Patterns for Speaking about the Gods

The first question highlighted above – namely, what instances of theology are to be repudiated, and which are correct? – needs to be tackled by taking seriously Plato's admonition that we must speak about the gods in a way that pleases them.³⁵ This means that we must comply with their standards, and talk about them in an appropriate way. This does not mean that we can no longer use any mythical language in which we present the gods *as if* they were corporeal beings. It is remarkable that Plato never rejects anthropomorphism as such, as Xenophanes had done. Plato seems to accept that different contexts require different keys³⁶ – and in myth, Plato himself presents the gods in an anthropomorphic way.

This situation suggests that Plato's main intention is not to reinvent religion or mythology, but rather to articulate the rules by which a genuine discourse about the gods must abide. This is rendered explicit in the second book of the *Republic*, where Plato indicates that blasphemous myths (those displaying a lack of virtue on the part of the gods) cannot be tolerated, even when the author conceived them in an allegorical way:

We won't admit stories into our city – whether allegorical or not – about Hera being chained by her son, nor about Hephaestus being hurled from heaven by his father when he tried to help his mother, who was being beaten, nor about the battle of the gods in Homer. The young can't distinguish what is allegorical from what isn't, and the opinions they absorb at that age are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable. For these reasons, then, we should probably take the utmost

³⁵ See above, pp. 30–34.

³⁶ Cf., e.g., *Tim.* 41a (quoted below, p. 46), where Plato affirms that the gods who are not attached to celestial bodies (i.e., the traditional gods) reveal themselves 'to the extent that they are willing'. This apparently includes anthropomorphic forms.

care to insure that the first stories they hear about virtue are the best ones for them to hear. (*Rep.* II, 378d–e, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve)

Plato thus accepts that certain myths and stories may be taken or intended to be an allegory (ὀνόματα), while at the same time stating that people should be able to recognize this allegorical meaning. As youngsters are not capable of doing so, they should not be exposed to this type of poetry. This judgement is complemented with the statement that Plato is not going to rewrite the myths, but rather to set the boundaries for a good theological discourse:

You and I, Adeimantus, aren't poets, but we are founding a city. And it's appropriate for the founders to know the patterns on which poets must base their stories and from which they mustn't deviate. But we aren't actually going to compose their poems for them. (*Rep.* II, 378e–379a, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve)

These 'patterns' for theology (τύποι ἐν οἷς δεῖ μυθολογεῖν τοὺς ποιητάς),³⁷ also termed 'laws' (νόμοι, 380c), are explained straightforwardly in what follows:

Socrates: Now, a god is really good, isn't he, and must be described as such?

Adeimantus: What else?

S: And surely nothing good is harmful, is it?

A: I suppose not.

S: And can what isn't harmful do harm?

A: Never.

S: Or can what does no harm do anything bad?

A: No.

S: And can what does nothing bad be the cause of anything bad?

A: How could it?

(*Rep.* II, 379b, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve)

The first pattern thus requires that god must always be represented as he is, namely as producing *goodness*. In that sense, Homer and the other poets have done a bad job by representing the gods committing the worst crimes, 'warring, fighting, or plotting against one another', and hating each other (378b–c).

Moreover, this pattern has consequences for what modern philosophers would call 'theodicy': identifying the divine as good entails that he/she cannot be held responsible for evil effects in the world:

Therefore, since a god is good, he is not – as most people claim – the cause of everything that happens to human beings but of only a few things, for good things are fewer than bad ones in our lives. He alone is responsible for the good

³⁷ *Rep.* II, 379a2–6; 380c6; 383a2.

things, but we must find some other cause for the bad ones, not a god. (*Rep.* II, 379c, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve)

This idea will be repeated at the end of the *Republic* with the famous phrase 'god is not responsible' (θεὸς ἀνάιτιος) (*Rep.* X, 617e), which explains that the gods cannot be held responsible for the human soul's bad choices.

And in sum, the first pattern for Platonic theology comes down to the following:

This, then, is one of the laws or patterns concerning the gods to which speakers and poets must conform, namely, that a god isn't the cause of all things but only of good ones. (*Rep.* II, 380c, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve)

The first rule is thus stated in terms of the causal operations performed by the gods: they cannot *but* produce goodness. This obviously entails that they are good themselves, but the emphasis in this passage is clearly on goodness as the effect of the gods' activities. In this context, Plato's rule serves the purpose of rejecting the traditional poets' descriptions of the gods doing bad things. But at the same time, it is in line with his analyses in the *Laws* Book X, where, as we shall see in the next chapter, the existence of the gods is deduced from the order in the universe, i.e., from the goodness of the order produced by them. Thus, in the *Republic* as well as in the *Laws*, Plato adopts a form of reasoning *ex effectibus*, based in both cases on the claim that the gods must instate the good.

The second pattern (*Rep.* II, 380d–383a) is closely related to the first. It is designed to counteract the poetic descriptions of gods who, much like sorcerers, deceive human beings and each other:

What about this second law? Do you think that a god is a sorcerer, able to appear in different forms at different times, sometimes changing himself from his own form into many shapes, sometimes deceiving us by making us think that he has done it? Or do you think he's simple and least of all likely to step out of his own form? (*Rep.* II, 380c–d, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve)

The gods cannot reveal themselves unless it be in the way in which they truly are: any change in the gods' shape would entail that they alter themselves into what is less beautiful and less good. And it is inconceivable that perfect beings like the gods would do that:

S: Whatever is in good condition, then, whether by nature or craft or both, admits least of being changed by anything else.

A: So it seems.

S: Now, surely a god and what belongs to him are in every way in the best condition.

A: How could they fail to be?

S: Then a god would be least likely to have many shapes.

A: Indeed.

S: Then does he change or alter himself?

A: Clearly he does, if indeed he is altered at all.

S: Would he change himself into something better and more beautiful than himself or something worse and uglier?

A: It would have to be into something worse, if he's changed at all, for surely we won't say that a god is deficient in either beauty or virtue.

S: Absolutely right. And do you think, Adeimantus, that anyone, whether god or human, would deliberately make himself worse in any way?

A: No, that's impossible.

S: Is it impossible, then, for gods to want to alter themselves? Since they are the most beautiful and best possible, it seems that each always and unconditionally retains his own shape.

A: That seems entirely necessary to me.

(*Rep.* II, 381b–c, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve)

The falsehood implied in those alleged, deceptive appearances of the gods is therefore the worst kind of deception:

S: What? Would a god be willing to be false, either in word or deed, by presenting an illusion?

A: I don't know.

S: Don't you know that a *true* falsehood, if one may call it that, is hated by all gods and humans?

A: What do you mean?

S: I mean that no one is willing to tell falsehoods to the most important part of himself about the most important things, but of all places he is most afraid to have falsehood there.

A: I still don't understand.

S: That's because you think I'm saying something deep. I simply mean that to be false to one's soul about the things that are, to be ignorant and to have and hold falsehood there, is what everyone would least of all accept, for everyone hates a falsehood in that place most of all.

(*Rep.* II, 382a–b, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve, emphasis added by the translators)

The sense of these remarks is rendered clearer by the contrast with falsehood in words (i.e. telling lies) which Socrates develops next. To have a wrong opinion of the gods is not the same as telling false stories: in the latter case we know we are deceiving others, even if we don't know the true state of affairs ourselves. So deception in words implies, not complete ignorance, but an intention to give out what we know to be untrue information. Having a wrong opinion of the gods, on the other hand, involves an ignorance that does not recognize its own deficiency, and when *this* kind of ignorance is revealed, it is hated by all gods and humans.

Telling lies is a deception that may in some cases be justified and useful: when it comes to protecting ourselves against enemies, preventing our friends from doing stupid things, or telling stories about things we do not actually know (like the stories and myths about the gods). It is clear that none of these cases can be attributed to the gods: they don't fear their enemies and hence they don't need to deceive them; they don't have any friends who are led astray by madness or ignorance; nor are they ignorant about their own nature. Hence, this kind of falsehood in words simply cannot be ascribed to the gods (382c–e). And the second Platonic pattern or law, therefore, reads as follows:

S: A god, then, is simple and true in word and deed. He doesn't change himself or deceive others by images, words, or signs, whether in visions or in dreams.

A: That's what I thought as soon as I heard you say it.

S: You agree, then, that this is our second pattern for speaking or composing poems about the gods: they are not sorcerers who change themselves, nor do they mislead us by falsehoods in words or deeds.

A: I agree.

(*Rep.* II, 382e–383a, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve)

This double requirement, that the gods must be described both as good and as unchangeable (particularly in the sense of not showing themselves any differently than they really are), underlies the entire Platonic theology.

5 Cosmology and Morality

As we have seen, religious beliefs in Plato's days had become enormously complex. The most relevant complexity, for us, was the tension between a (purified) anthropomorphic representation of the gods, and the cosmological function of the gods in explaining the order of the universe. As it appears, Plato was well aware of this tension, and he cautiously holds together these opposite tendencies. His solution to contemporary theological contradictions consists, in broad outline, in an overall account of the universe as well-designed, viewing *goodness* as the binding force of the cosmos, and deducing moral goodness from this universal order.

The *Laws* Book X contains Plato's last, most elaborate and most notorious account of the existence of the gods. This account reads as a very long preamble to the institution of a law that sanctions atheism, and deals with three different claims espoused by atheists:

(1) that the gods do not exist, (2) that they exist but take no thought for the human race, or (3) that they are influenced by sacrifices and supplications and can easily be won over. (*Laws* X, 885b, tr. T.J. Saunders)

In his reply to the first claim – which is by far the longest of the three replies – Plato follows a peculiar procedure. His counterargument to the denial of the existence of the gods starts with a simple reference to the order in the universe, the structured sequel of seasons and years and months, and to the fact that ‘all Greeks and barbarians are unanimous in recognizing the existence of the gods.’ (*Laws* X, 886a, tr. T.J. Saunders). Yet, as the Athenian stranger remarks, this answer will not do in confronting a reflective atheism. It suggests that any denial of the existence of the gods stems from a kind of ignorance, a lack of reflection which is due to people being overwhelmed by temptation and desire (886a), meaning that these people don't see the truth because they simply aren't interested in knowing it – and assuming that an interest in knowledge would immediately lead to the correct conclusion. The lawgiver's true adversaries, the Athenian warns, are tougher: they are people who have reflected upon the nature of things, and who have come to the conclusion that the existence of the universe is a matter of sheer ‘nature and chance’, not of design or order (889b).³⁸ Design or order (τέχνη) is posterior to this coming into being of the universe, and only consists in representations or imitations of natural things, or in politics and constitutions, in bringing order to human sociable existence (889c–e). The acceptance of the existence of the gods is part of this *a posteriori* search for order:

Ath.: My dear fellow, the first thing these people say about the gods is that they are artificial concepts corresponding to nothing in nature; they are legal fictions, which moreover vary widely according to the different conventions people agree on when they produce a legal code. In particular, goodness according to nature and goodness according to the law are two different things, and there is no natural standard of justice at all. (*Laws* X, 889e, tr. T.J. Saunders)

Plato's refutation of this claim will consist in a lengthy discourse that is meant to prove that the structure of the universe is not a matter of chance, but rather of design. We shall analyze this text at length in the next chapter.³⁹ Suffice it to point out here that Plato's view is based on the acceptance that any order in the universe

³⁸ See above, p. 16.

³⁹ See below, pp. 97–103.

(such as the revolutions of the celestial bodies, the structure of the world, the seasons) is due to divine souls who are endowed with intellect (νοῦς).

Thus, Plato's main argument for the existence of the gods is a cosmological one. The atheists are refuted by proving that the cosmos is built up in an orderly way, which could never happen if matter were left untended and undirected. Nature itself is produced by the operation of souls that, on account of their intellect, install an order in it (*Laws X*, 890d).

Once this has been pointed out, Plato tackles the second claim put forward by atheists. Again, this is a text which we shall analyze in the next chapter, as it is primarily suited to the purpose of showing how Platonic theology and metaphysics cohere. Yet it also matters here, as it contains a firm statement about the gods' rewarding or punishing moral actions.

According to Plato, it is obvious that the gods do care about the human race; if they can produce the order of the entire universe, then why wouldn't they be capable of taking care of the smaller parts?

We must not suppose that God, who is supremely wise, and willing and able to superintend the world, looks to major matters but – like a faint-hearted lazybones who throws up his hands at hard work – neglects the minor, which we established were in fact *easier* to look after. (*Laws X*, 902e–903a, tr. T.J. Saunders, his capitals, his emphasis)

This means that god does supervise the whole universe, down to its smallest elements:

The supervisor of the universe has arranged everything with an eye to its preservation and excellence, and its individual parts play appropriate active or passive roles according to their various capacities. These parts, down to the smallest details of their active and passive functions, have each been put under the control of ruling powers that have perfected the minutest constituents of the universe. (*Laws X*, 903b, tr. T.J. Saunders)

And this even holds true for those who fail to recognize this divine care, and who are addressed in the following way:

Now then, you perverse fellow, one such part – a mere speck that nevertheless constantly contributes to the whole – is you, you who have forgotten that nothing is created except to provide the entire universe with a life of prosperity. You forget that creation is not for your benefit: *you* exist for the sake of the universe. (*Laws X*, 903c, tr. T.J. Saunders modified, his emphasis)

Every creature thus contributes to the order of the world, whether or not it is aware of its role. This idea is then further developed by reference to a checkers-player whose task it is to promote or demote our souls according to the moral progress

we make (or fail to make). We shall have to investigate in detail who this checkers-player may be, but at the moment, we need this passage to show that the structure of the universe entails a moral duty for the soul:

With this grand purpose in view he has worked out what sort of position, in what regions, should be assigned to a soul to match its changes of character; but he left it to the individual's acts of will to determine the *direction* of these changes. You see, the way we react to particular circumstances is almost invariably determined by our desires and our psychological state. (*Laws* X, 904 b-c, tr. T.J. Saunders, his emphasis)

The divine 'supervisor' or 'king' thus has as his task to ensure the right destiny of all souls, while leaving over to individual souls the responsibility to actually make the decisions, or determine the direction a given individual wants to take. The divine order is thus not responsible for the moral choices made by an individual.⁴⁰ That is to say, the 'supervisor' or 'king' presides over the goodness of the souls' acts and decisions, also in their task of constituting the order of the universe: to that purpose, the 'supervisor' has placed the souls where they belong, and where they can most effectively and efficiently enhance the good (virtuous) nature of the universe. All souls are thus created in the best possible place for them to perform their tasks. If they choose against that ordained good, it is entirely up to them, and they will be treated accordingly.

Even though we postpone a full treatment of this passage, we may already draw the conclusion that for Plato, the cosmological order entails the moral one. The recognition of our (our soul's, that is) place in the universe leads to the recognition of the moral duties that attend it. We are placed in the order of things to produce the good, just as the gods design the good order of things. The gods, moreover, supervise our moral progress, and will eventually punish or reward us for what we have accomplished.

6 The Existence of the Gods as Souls

Having established how the gods are to be spoken of, and how they play a role in cosmology, we should now address the question of the gods' nature. In the *Timaeus* (41a–b), the gods are referred to as being constituted by an indissoluble combination of soul and body. This does not mean, however, that the gods have a body in the same or even a similar way to humans. Any account of Plato's gods existing as a soul-body combination needs to be complemented by a thorough investigation of the nature of the divine soul as expounded in the *Phaedrus*

⁴⁰ Taking up the idea that 'god is not responsible' (θεὸς ἀναίτιος) from *Rep.* X, 617e. See above, p. 40.

(246a–247e), where Plato indicates that the gods' soul is by no means hindered by their body.

6.1 The Gods' Souls and Bodies

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato gives the following reflection on a definition of 'the gods':

And now I should try to tell you why living things are said to include both mortal and immortal beings [...] The whole combination of soul and body is called a living thing, or animal, and has the designation 'mortal' as well. The designation 'immortal' [applied to a combination of body and soul], on the other hand, is not based on any reasonable account. In fact it is pure fiction, based neither on observation nor on adequate reasoning, that a god is an immortal living thing which has a body and a soul, and that these are bound together by nature for all time – but of course we must let this be as it may please the gods, and speak accordingly. (*Phdr.* 246b–d, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, modified)

This passage is sometimes taken to be an obvious entryway to Plato's views on the existence of the gods. Luc Brisson, for instance, considers this a clear statement of a definition to which Plato ascribes throughout his career.⁴¹ Brisson points out that Plato's gods are immortal living beings, constituted as a combination of body and soul, which will never be dissolved, even though all corporeal things are necessarily dissoluble and hence mortal. The reason for the gods' being an exception to this general rule is explained in the *Timaeus*. We shall have to discuss this dialogue, including the present passage, at length,⁴² but at this point we need to inspect the way in which the gods are addressed by the Demiurge in the following passage:

When all the gods had come to be, both the ones who make their rounds conspicuously and the ones who present themselves only to the extent that they are willing, the begetter of the universe spoke to them. This is what he said: 'O gods of gods, works divine whose maker and father I am, whatever has come to be by my hands cannot be undone but by my consent. Now while it is true that anything that is bound is liable to being undone, still, only one who is evil would consent to the undoing of what has been well fitted together and is in fine condition. This is the reason why you, as creatures that have come to be, are neither completely immortal nor exempt from being undone. Still, you will not be undone nor will death be your portion, since you have received the guarantee of my will – a greater, more sovereign bond than those with which you were bound when you came to be'. (*Tim.* 41a–b, tr. D.J. Zeyl, slightly modified)

⁴¹ Luc Brisson, 'Le corps des dieux', in Jérôme Laurent (ed.), *Les dieux de Platon* (Caen, 2003), p. 11: 'Cette définition est claire et ne variera pas'.

⁴² See below, pp. 81–7, 90, 91–4 and 95–7.

This address by the Demiurge to the newly created gods confirms that Plato's gods are a combination of soul and body, and since this combination is generated by the Maker of the universe, it must also be dissoluble by Him. Yet the gods owe their immortality to the fact that – unlike mortal beings – their combination will never actually be dissolved. Thus, the gods' combination is not in itself unbreakable, but it will never be broken because it is a good and harmonious combination designed by the Demiurge.

Thus, the *Timaeus* confirms the description of the gods as having soul and body. Yet however important this indissolubility may be in describing the gods' nature, it is of secondary importance to another feature that characterizes Plato's gods. The *Phaedrus* passage quoted earlier is in fact rather ambiguous about the designation 'immortal'. Indeed, it is hard to explain why a straightforward definition of the mode of existence of the gods would have to be introduced as 'not based on any reasonable account', as something that is 'pure fiction', without any root in observation or adequate reasoning. Would not this be a clear caveat hanging over the attempt to discuss immortality in this passage? Rather than take this as a fixed definition, then, it would be more prudent to say, at least, that Plato shrinks from drawing a quick parallel between the constitution of the gods and the combined nature of other living beings. Even though the introduction to the passage promises to give an account of both mortal and immortal beings, the analysis of immortal beings is obviously left open, with – once again – the typical indication that, ultimately, we do not know what the gods really are like.⁴³

What Plato is addressing in this passage from *Phaedrus*, then, is the easy and unreflective way in which the gods are usually depicted as having a body and a soul. Plato questions this, and seems to suggest that this way of representing the gods is *not* the best possible way – nor indeed is it a 'definition' of the gods. This definition would entail a contradiction, as corporeality goes together with mortality, and hence, it requires the addition of the non-obvious argument in the *Timaeus* that, in the case of the gods, a specific combination of body and soul is 'bound together by nature for all time'. I believe it is this difficulty that brings Socrates in the *Phaedrus* to the inference that the view he expresses is not reasonable. The argument in the *Timaeus* would then primarily serve the purpose of showing how the corporeal nature of the gods (especially of the celestial bodies) constitutes some kind of exception to the laws of corporeality, without actually claiming to be a 'reasonable account'.

Thus, in the end, this passage from the *Phaedrus* does not seem to bring us much further in our analysis of the gods' manner of existence. Yet this part of the *Phaedrus* does offer an important element that tends to be overlooked. The very beginning of the myth of the winged chariot (immediately preceding the passage quoted above) presents a comparison between gods and mortal beings:

⁴³ See above, pp. 30–34.

Now the horses and charioteers of the gods are all good and of good descent, but those of other races are mixed; and first the charioteer of the human soul drives a pair, and secondly one of the horses is noble and of noble breed, but the other quite the opposite in breed and character. Therefore in our case the driving is necessarily difficult and troublesome. (*Phaedrus* 246a–b, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff)

This means that the gods have an undefiled soul, without any internal conflict, and hence without any loss of feathers or burdens of any kind. The human soul, on the other hand, is always struggling and attempting to remain in the heavens. When Plato proceeds, then, to discuss the difference between mortals and immortals, this feature provides the distinctive criterion:

Now we must try to tell why a living being is called mortal or immortal. All that is soul has the care of all that which is soulless, and it traverses the whole heaven, appearing sometimes in one form and sometimes in another; now when it is perfect and fully winged, it mounts upward and governs the whole world; but the soul that has lost its wings is borne along until it gets hold of something solid, when it settles down, taking upon itself an earthly body. (*Phaedrus* 246b–c, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff)

The difference between divine and mortal souls is established on the basis of the fact that mortal souls fall, and hence take on a mortal body. The perfect and fully winged souls, on the contrary, remain in heaven and ‘govern the whole world’. That is the *Phaedrus* myth’s description of divine existence, and such souls are thus not hindered by any corporeal burden. That should not have to mean that the gods’ souls exist without a body, but it does entail that the status of the body is different from the mortal one. It might be the case that Plato’s hesitancy to accept the notion of ‘immortality’ in the passage discussed above is due to the fact that the gods are *more* than just ‘immortal’. The gods are not just immortal combinations of soul and body, but *special* combinations of souls and bodies: their immortality is due to the fact that their bodies do not hinder the soul’s activity, or drag the soul down to an earthly existence.

Thus, after all, a number of basic assumptions can be derived from this passage about the gods’ existence. They *are* immortal, but in a specific sense. They are souls, which entails that they take care of what is soulless; and they are undefiled souls, perfect and fully winged, whose competence is by that very fact not limited by taking care of an earthly body: rather, they govern the whole world. They are souls as pure as one can conceive them – hence it is safe to say that the gods are primarily souls. Their body has no ‘weight’: it does not have any influence on the soul’s activity.

These basic assumptions are confirmed in the sequel of this passage. *Phaedrus* 246d–247e describes the life of the gods (as it is called in retrospect at *Phdr.* 248a: ‘that is the life of the gods’, Καὶ οὗτος μὲν θεῶν βίος), starting with a general description of the importance of the wings of the chariot (which is the soul):

By their nature wings have the power to lift up heavy things and raise them aloft where the gods all dwell, and so, more than any other thing that pertains to the body, they are akin to the divine, which has beauty, wisdom, goodness, and everything of that sort. These nourish the soul's wings, which grow best in their presence; but foulness and ugliness make the wings shrink and disappear. (*Phdr.* 246d–e, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, slightly modified)

This reference to the wings as ‘something that pertains to the body’ should not be given too much weight, as it was made clear earlier on in the *Phaedrus* that the earthly body is taken on when the soul sheds its wings:

a soul that sheds its wings wanders until it lights on something solid, where it settles and takes on an earthly body. (*Phdr.* 246c, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff: ἡ δὲ πεπορησασα φέρεται ἕως ἂν στερεοῦ τινοῦ ἀντιλάβηται, οὗ κατοικισθεῖσα, σῶμα γήϊνον λαβοῦσα)

This means, then, that the wings are part of the soul's incorporeal nature, and that the reference to wings as belonging to the body is only pointing out how, within the corporeal world, wings are what make bodies do something against their naturally heavy condition.

The soul's elevation is thus dependent on the set of (incorporeal) wings that belong to its nature, and which need to be nourished. It is beauty, wisdom, goodness and the like that are the soul's nourishment, and that bring the soul to ascend to where the gods dwell, as beauty, wisdom and goodness are akin to the divine (τὸ δὲ θεῖον καλόν, σοφόν, ἀγαθόν, *Phdr.* 246d–e). Ugliness and foulness, on the other hand, make the soul lose its wings.

These remarks are in reference to the condition and destiny of the human soul. Immediately after this, Plato describes the souls of the gods, also in terms of a winged chariot, thus indicating that the gods' souls do not essentially differ from other souls. Their superiority is due to that fact that they do not lose their wings, that their horses are not hindering them, and that their chariots move easily:

Now Zeus, the great commander in heaven, drives his winged chariot first in the procession, looking after everything and putting all things in order. Following him is an army of gods and spirits arranged in eleven sections [...] When they go to feast at the banquet they have a steep climb to the high tier at the rim of heaven; on this slope the gods' chariots move easily, since they are balanced and well under control, but the other chariots barely make it. The heaviness of the bad horse drags its charioteer toward the earth and weighs him down if he has failed to train it well, and this causes the most extreme toil and struggle that a soul will face. But when the souls we call immortals reach the top, they move outward and take their stand on the high ridge of heaven, where its circular motion carries them around as they stand while they gaze upon what is outside heaven. (*Phdr.* 246e, 247a–c, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff)

The gods are clearly described as souls here, souls which have the advantage of a charioteer who never displays any difficulty in controlling the chariot's horses. This is why they have a steady view of the 'place beyond heaven', contemplating true reality, 'visible only to the intellect, the soul's steersman' (ψυχῆς κυβερνήτη μόνῳ θεατῇ νῶ, 247c–d). What the intellect sees are the things that truly *are*: Truth, Justice, Temperance, Knowledge (of things eternal, it is specified, not of things that change: *Phdr.* 247d–e). All of this indicates that 'a god's mind (διάνοια) is nourished by intelligence and pure knowledge (νῶ τε καὶ ἐπιστήμη ἀκηράτῳ), as is the mind of any soul that is concerned to take in what is appropriate to it' (247d). Hence, the gods are the highest souls, not in the sense that they have a different mode of existence than all other souls, but because their functions and operations are always perfect and successful, due to their perfectly balanced nature. They are involved in contemplating the Ideas, nourishing themselves through intellect and pure knowledge, even though this activity is not permanent:

And when the soul has seen all the things that are as they are and feasted on them, it sinks back inside heaven and goes home. On its arrival, the charioteer stables the horses by the manger, throws in ambrosia, and gives them nectar to drink besides. That is the life of the gods. (*Phdr.* 247e, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff)

One can thus readily infer that the gods' existence is that of a pure soul, displaying a perfect harmony and a perfectly happy life of contemplation (performed by unimpeded intellect) and drinking ambrosia. Their having a body should not be taken as a determining element of their existence. The gods' life of contemplation is realized without any corporeal burden. In other words: their body has no influence on them.

On the other hand, this does not mean that the gods' souls are *always* of necessity combined with a body. It is clear that the celestial gods are souls who govern the planets (*Tim.* 40a–d), and who are thus linked to a body. In the *Laws* Book X, Plato applies this feature to the sun, while leaving open the question of how the sun's soul steers its body: as residing within the body, as acquiring its own body by which it pushes the sun around, or as having entirely immaterial, wondrous powers to move the sun. The question is left unanswered, but it is nevertheless clear that the sun is a combination of soul and body, and that the sun can only move in an orderly way because it is steered by a soul.⁴⁴

As to the traditional gods, however, Plato is less affirmative. The creation of the gods in the *Timaeus* is summarized as follows:

⁴⁴ *Laws* X, 898e–899a, discussed below, p. 102. See also *Laws* X, 904 a–b, where the combination of body and soul in the case of the 'gods in accordance to law' (οἱ κατὰ νόμον ὄντες θεοί) is said to be an eternal creation (the text is quoted below, p. 115). Plato is referring here to what he introduced at *Laws* X, 891e, as 'the gods who are said to be in accordance to law' (οἱ κατὰ νόμον λεγόμενοι θεοί), which are probably the celestial gods (or at least the souls who govern the celestial bodies and all things natural).

When all the gods had come to be, both the ones who make their rounds conspicuously and the ones who present themselves only to the extent that they are willing, the begetter of the universe spoke to them. (*Tim.* 41a, tr. D.J. Zeyl)

The first kind of gods, ‘who make their rounds conspicuously’, are clearly the celestial bodies – corporeal gods indeed. The second kind, however, are gods who are not so evidently determined by a corporeal nature. Those gods would have to be the traditional gods, as they were introduced immediately before this passage (at *Tim.* 40d–41a), following a discussion of the celestial bodies.⁴⁵ As the traditional gods apparently do not necessarily meet the requirement of being ‘conspicuous’ or corporeal,⁴⁶ one can hardly infer that the combination by which the gods are constituted would be a combination of body and soul. This seems to mean that the (traditional) gods’ corporeal presence is a matter of their choice: they may remain invisible, or they may take on a bodily shape to their liking. From the previous chapter, however, we know that this shape is not going to be a false or misleading one: the gods will reveal themselves as they are. But apparently, they can do so in different ways.

A similar idea is to be found in *Laws* XI, where the Athenian stranger indicates that

Time-honored cult observances all over the world fall into two categories. Man exalts some of the gods because he can see them with his own eyes, others he represents, by setting up statues of them, and believes that his worship of these inanimate ‘gods’ ensures him the abundant gratitude and benevolence of their real and living counterparts. (*Laws* XI, 930e–931a, tr. T.J. Saunders)

In this case, too, Plato intimates that the gods may be visible as well as incorporeal.⁴⁷

However this may be meant, it is clear that, even in those passages where the gods are clearly described as having soul *and* body, the gods’ existence is first and foremost that of a pure soul, upon which the presence of a body has no influence whatsoever. The gods’ bodies do not lower their souls’ status, nor do such bodies affect their capacity to contemplate the intelligible. Thus, to conclude, the gods’ souls are soul *par excellence*.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of these texts, see pp. 84–6.

⁴⁶ It is relevant to note that the transition between the discussion of the celestial bodies and the introduction of the traditional gods is marked by the words ‘Wherefore, let this account suffice us, and let our discourse concerning the nature of the visible and generated gods have an end.’ (*Tim.* 40d). This means that the gods to be treated next, i.e., the traditional gods, are not ‘visible’.

⁴⁷ This conclusion is supported by the fact that the adjective θεῖος often refers to merely intelligible things. See, e.g., *Polit.* 269d: ‘Remaining permanently in the same state and condition, and being permanently the same, belongs only to the most divine things of all, and by its nature body is not of this order.’ (Τὸ κατὰ ταῦτα καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχειν ἀεὶ καὶ ταῦτὸν εἶναι τοῖς πάντων θειοτάτοις προσήκει μόνους, σώματος δὲ φύσις οὐ ταύτης τῆς τάξεως, tr. C.J. Rowe).

6.2 Further Characteristics of the Gods' Souls

As we shall see later on, the gods' souls are primarily characterized as having intellect (νοῦς), and their essential activity consists in thinking the Forms. Moreover, they perform the demiurgic task of transmitting the intelligible structure to the sensible world, each god taking care of his/her own part of reality.⁴⁸

Plato indicates that these divine activities are performed without pleasure. As pleasure is concomitant to a movement that restores a natural state – a state without any lack – its occurrence requires that this state without any lack first be interrupted and restored. It is inconceivable that the gods could suffer such a state of lack, and hence, they cannot experience the movement towards satisfaction. In the *Philebus*, where the discussion is about the relative role of intellect and pleasure in the good life, the life entirely devoted to intellect is indicated as divine, and yet without pleasure:

Socrates: It was one of the conditions agreed on in our comparison of lives that the person who chooses the life of reason and intelligence must not enjoy pleasures either large or small.

Protarchus: That was indeed agreed on.

S.: He may then live in this fashion, and perhaps there would be nothing absurd if this life turns out to be the most godlike.

Pr.: It is at any rate not likely that the gods experience either pleasure or the opposite.

S.: It is certainly not likely. For either of these states would be quite unseemly in their case. (*Phil.* 33b, tr. D. Frede)

As opposed to the gods, human beings would never want to choose this type of life without pleasure, as Plato indicated earlier on in the *Philebus* (22d–e); but that is obviously due to our human condition, which is a mixed life, and hence, not comparable to the perfectly noetic life of the gods.

This analysis represents a peculiarity of Plato's theory of the good human life, and of the nature of pleasure as replenishment. One might term it one of the shortcomings of Plato's physiological account of pleasure that a 'higher' pleasure – pleasure accompanying intellectual activity or contemplation – cannot be brought under its overall definition.⁴⁹

On the other hand, without any reference to his elaborate theory of pleasure, Plato does indicate that the activity of the gods (and of those souls that are given the privilege of circulating with them in the place beyond heaven) entails a state of wellbeing or delight (εὐπάθεια):

⁴⁸ See below, pp. 95–103.

⁴⁹ See my *Pleasure and the Good Life. Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists* (Philosophia Antiqua, 85. Leiden, 2000), pp. 17–43.

Now a god's mind is nourished by intelligence and pure knowledge, as is the mind of any soul that is concerned to take in what is appropriate to it, and so it is delighted at last to be seeing what is real and watching what is true, feeding on all this and feeling wonderful, until the circular motion brings it around to where it started. (*Phdr.* 247d, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff)

Also in the myth of Er (*Rep.* X, 615a), this wellbeing is experienced by those souls who were given access to a heavenly journey, contemplating truth for a thousand years. There is, thus, some kind of bliss involved in the life of the gods, which is an eternal state of contemplating truth.

7 Plato's Pantheon

It has often been remarked that Plato's dialogues are full of gods and divine beings. Auguste Diès emblematically expresses this with the question, 'Qu'est-ce qui n'est pas dieu chez Platon?'⁵⁰ Those divinities include the traditional Greek gods, Egyptian gods, celestial bodies (the sun, the moon, the planets, the stars), heroes and daemons, and so forth, without any apparent systematic classification of things divine.

The presence – or especially, the abundance – of Plato's references to traditional gods has given rise to questions. Many commentators fail to understand how an enlightened thinker like Plato, who time and again criticizes the poets and their myths as inept for conveying a true image of the gods, can still refer to those gods in their traditional anthropomorphic guises. A possible explanation is that all of these mentions of the traditional gods must be seen as ironic: Plato refers to a belief that he did not share. The alternative he introduces would then be a fully cosmological account of the gods as astral beings, as expounded in the *Timaeus* and implied in the *Laws* X.

This account is unsatisfactory for more than one reason. First and foremost, Plato's caution when speaking about the gods cannot be reduced to mere irony.⁵¹ As we have seen, his reverence for divine names and epithets is a matter of piety rather than critique. Moreover, the caution he expresses does not prevent him from embracing the traditional accounts after all. The statements quoted above, by which Plato puts things in perspective ('be that as it may', 'may the gods be pleased by the names we give them'), did not lead to a rejection of classical patterns. To the contrary: the traditional accounts were left untouched by Plato, for lack of a better alternative. This was also the drift of the 'patterns for theology', which provide

⁵⁰ Auguste Diès, *Autour de Platon: Essais de critique et d'histoire* (Paris, 1927), vol. 2, p. 575.

⁵¹ *Contra* Alfred E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (6th ed., London, 1949), p. 452.

moulds for adjusting the received stories rather than guidelines for introducing new accounts of the gods.

Yet even when all the evidence points in the direction of the importance of traditional gods, Plato's account of the gods does include a number of other divinities, which are mainly characterized as cosmic or astral forces. As we have seen, this is not atypical of fourth-century BC speculations about the divine. However, this does not free us from the task of inquiring how Plato could himself combine these heterogeneous claims.

One specific divinity will require a more elaborate inquiry: the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*. Many commentators have assumed that Plato's divine ranks (traditional and celestial gods alike) are superseded by this newly introduced, supreme god who, as a creator, presides over all other divinities.⁵² As we shall argue, this view raises a number of specific problems and contradictions, and it is so specifically tied to only one dialogue (the *Timaeus*) that it is in fact unlikely that the Demiurge represents Plato's highest god, or even that the Demiurge should be literally understood as being 'a' god at all. But since this problematic is crucial to understanding how Plato's theology coheres with his metaphysics, we shall postpone discussion of the Demiurge, and take it up in the next chapter.

7.1 The Traditional Gods

The evidence that Plato shows genuine respect to the traditional gods is overwhelming. Aikaterini Lefka has been investigating the numeric features of the mentions of different traditional gods, and the results are undeniable: the gods are mentioned in all the works of Plato, in all sorts of contexts (discussing the cosmos, the city, human nature, or everyday activities), from occasional invocations over pledges of worship through descriptions of their nature. The context is mostly *not* ironic or meant to put things in perspective.⁵³ The gods are inscribed in Plato's societal and educational project, and certainly not as mere adornment or metaphor. As Daniel Babut puts it:

One would be tempted to say, parodying Plato's words, that the Olympians were not just useful to him from a societal, educative or legislative viewpoint – as they are the indispensable ground for the religion of the city – but that Plato still envisages them as *true*, whereby the two criteria, the theological and the utilitarian, meet again.⁵⁴

⁵² Aikaterini Lefka, 'La présence des divinités traditionnelles dans l'œuvre de Platon', in Jérôme Laurent (ed.), *Les dieux de Platon* (Caen, 2003), pp. 103–04.

⁵³ Lefka, 'La présence des divinités traditionnelles', pp. 99–103.

⁵⁴ Daniel Babut, *La religion des philosophes grecs, de Thalès aux stoïciens* (Paris, 1974), p. 94: 'On serait tenté de dire, en parodiant Platon, que les Olympiens ne lui paraissent pas seulement utiles d'un point de vue social, éducatif ou législatif – en tant qu'ils sont le fondement indispensable de la religion de la cité – mais qu'ils ont encore à ses

Plato thus takes the traditional gods seriously. Moreover, they keep their traditional characters and fields of influence, even though, as one would expect, Plato never describes them in terms that are contrary to his 'patterns for theology'.

Zeus, for example, who is by far the most frequently mentioned god, is the king among the gods ('god of the gods', according to *Critias* 121b). Plato's Zeus warrants divine justice as an impartial judge,⁵⁵ as he did in Homeric/Hesiodic and tragic myth. Moreover, he is the patron of frontiers (and hence also the patron of the division of parcels and the patron of foreign guests),⁵⁶ of sovereignty and order (especially of the rule of law),⁵⁷ and of family bonds.⁵⁸ At the same time, Zeus remains a weather god, ruling the seasons and climatologic circumstances.⁵⁹ According to the myth of the *Politicus* (and the Prometheus myth in the *Protagoras*), Zeus governs the present era, in which human beings make their living through labour.⁶⁰ His predecessor Kronos, on the other hand, was the ruler of an era of spontaneous prosperity, and he represents a now lost model of kingship as a shepherd-king, leading his flock with wisdom and prudence.⁶¹ Plato thus takes over the Hesiodic idea of eras under the reign of successive gods.

There is nothing novel about these features, except for the fact that neither Zeus' nor Kronos' violent and cruel accessions to power is ever mentioned,⁶² nor is any reference ever made to Zeus' famously unbridled sexual appetite. That should clearly be seen as a censored version of Greek myth on the basis of Plato's patterns for theology. On the other hand, Zeus' connection to philosophy is stressed when, in the *Phaedrus*, Zeus is said to head those people 'who have a talent for philosophy and the guidance of others' (*Phdr.* 252e). Thus, Zeus can be seen as the patron of the philosopher-ruler. In the *Philebus*, the cause of the universe is described as

yeux leur *vérité*, les deux critères, théologique et utilitaire, se conjuguant ainsi une fois de plus.' (author's translation).

⁵⁵ Cf. *Laws* VI, 757b–c.

⁵⁶ For Zeus protector of the frontiers (Ζεὺς ὄριος), and protector of strangers (Ζεὺς ξένιος), see *Laws* VIII, 842e–843a; XII, 953e.

⁵⁷ For Zeus protector of the city (Ζεὺς πολιούχος): *Gorgias* 523a–524a, see *Laws* XI, 921c.

⁵⁸ For Zeus protector of family and ancestors (Ζεὺς ὁμόγνητος καὶ πατρῶος), see *Laws* IX, 881d.

⁵⁹ The weather and the seasons are called 'that which comes from Zeus' (τὰ ἐκ Διός): *Protagoras* 321a, *Politicus* 295d; *Critias* 111d, 118e; *Laws* VI, 761a–b, 779c; VIII, 844b–c.

⁶⁰ *Politicus* 272b, 272d–274d; *Protagoras* 320c–323d; for an account of the relation between the myths of the *Politicus* and of the *Protagoras*, see my 'Religion and Morality: Elements of Plato's Anthropology in the Myth of Prometheus (*Protagoras* 320D–322D)', in Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée and Francisco J. Gonzalez (eds), *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, Mnemosyne Supplements: Monographs on Greek and Latin Language and Literature, 337. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 152–9.

⁶¹ *Politicus* 271c–272d.

⁶² Cf. Lefka, 'La présence des divinités traditionnelles', p. 105.

a certain cause, of no small significance, that orders and coordinates the years, seasons, and months, and which has every right to the title of wisdom and intellect. (*Phil.* 30c, tr. D. Frede, slightly modified)

This reference to the traditional territory of Zeus (while adding intellect, νοῦς, to it)⁶³ is rendered more explicit in the following:

You will therefore say that in the nature of Zeus there is the soul of a king, as well as a king's intellect, in virtue of this power displayed by the cause. (*Phil.* 30d, tr. D. Frede, slightly modified)

One can observe that in instances such as this, Plato does tend to bring together the traditional image of Zeus with the cosmological account of the order of the universe. This opens up new questions: does Zeus lose his traditional anthropomorphic features in the event? And how does Zeus enter the stage of cosmology and metaphysics? No explicit answer is given, but the evidence suggests that the anthropomorphic account remains in place after all, and that Plato did not see any contradiction between a cosmological account of order and a reference to Zeus' wise, ruling force. Maybe this means that the order of the world is a (corporeal) aspect of how Zeus takes care of the cosmos – leaving open the question of whether this means that Zeus is to be identified with a cosmological force like the World-soul. In any case, it means that the image of the traditional gods is flexible enough to allow for associations and connections with cosmic elements, on the basis of the classical territories and operations ascribed to the gods.

The same can be said about other divinities. Plato often mentions the 'Twelve gods',⁶⁴ as a group or in their individual abilities, as protectors of society or aspects of daily life. This is so in incidental remarks as well as in the institutional arrangements of the *Republic* and the *Laws*.⁶⁵ It is safe to say that the philosophical innovations of Plato's political project by no means did away with the need to ground institutions on traditional religious belief and cult.

Other gods mentioned include Ouranos, Gaia, Okeanos, Thetys, Kronos, Rhea (whose classical genealogy Plato takes over at *Tim.* 41a), Helios, Selene, Hades,

⁶³ This addition of intellect (νοῦς) is not far-fetched, as traditional accounts of Zeus also stressed Zeus' possession of νόος, acquired through swallowing Mêtis ('cleverness'). See Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 129.

⁶⁴ The 'Twelve Olympians' are Zeus, Hera, Athena, Demeter, Aphrodite, Ares, Apollo, Hephaestus, Hermes, Artemis, Poseidon, and Hestia (who was sometimes, as on the Parthenon frieze, replaced by Dionysus; Dionysus was also referred to as the 'thirteenth Olympian'). See Burkert, *Greek Religion*, pp. 125–70.

⁶⁵ See, e.g., *Laws* V, 745b (division of the state in twelve parts); VI, 778c–d (erection of temples at the heart of the city); VIII, 828a–d (organization of festivals, devotion of the months of the calendar and of the twelve tribes to each of the Twelve gods, plus arrangements concerning the cult of the gods of the underworld).

Asclepius, Themis (the goddess of unwritten law, *Laws* XI, 936e), and of course, Eros, alongside the Muses, and Titans like Prometheus. The pantheon is further populated by heroes and chthonic divinities, and by divinized abstractions such as Poros, Penia, Dikè, and so forth.⁶⁶ Plato sometimes ventures to reinvent or redirect certain mythical elements (such as the birth of Eros out of Poros and Penia: *Symp.* 203b–e, or the myth of the Cicadas, *Phdr.* 259b–d, to name only two examples), but this is all perfectly in line with pre-existing conventions, norms and tendencies in Greek literature.

Nothing exceptional arises from this. Apart from his obvious emphasis on the goodness and wisdom of the gods, and apart from a number of explicit connections to specifically philosophical claims, Plato's account of the gods is firmly rooted in tradition. Moreover, Plato sets all kinds of activities, as well as the characters of persons, under the auspices of the gods. Philosophy itself is described as the best cult of the Muses (*Phaedo* 60e–61a), and, famously, as the initiation into the rites of Eros (*Symposium* 210a). As to a person's character, we have already discussed the passage in the *Phaedrus* where any person's nature is said to reflect the nature of one of the gods, while they all seek lovers among the same retinue (*Phdr.* 250b, 252e–253c). But special mention should be made here of the relationship between Socrates and Apollo. Socrates is obviously a philosopher, though not one of the type of Zeus (the philosopher-ruler). Throughout the *Apology* and dialogues, Socrates is intimately linked to the Delphic god, who was in a certain way responsible for Socrates' fate. Apollo's oracle – that Socrates was the wisest of the Athenians – led to Socrates' quest in his city, and to the enmity, trial and execution that followed from it. And, finally, Socrates' life in the service of 'his' god, Apollo, comes to an end with the song of the swans who rejoice the return to their god, Apollo (*Phaedo* 84e–85b).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Lefka, 'La présence des divinités traditionnelles', pp. 98–9, provides a full list of Plato's gods with an indication of their frequency.

⁶⁷ It should be noted here that a specific divine force, Socrates' *daimonion*, does not seem to be echoed by any other element in Plato's account of the gods. It is a 'wondrous thing' (δαμμόνιον), a voice that reveals itself only to Socrates. In Plato's version, as opposed to Xenophon's, this voice does nothing but order Socrates to stop doing something. The interpretation of what this 'stop' means is left over to Socrates himself, even though it is certain that the voice is always right. It has been argued that this voice is an intervention of the god of Delphi, thus linking the *daimonion* to an external and generally recognized god. See Christina Schefer, *Platon und Apollon: von Logos zurück zum Mythos*, International Plato Studies, 7 (Sankt Augustin, 1996), pp. 103–08, and Christopher D.C. Reeve, 'Socrates the Apollonian?' in Nicholas D. Smith and Paul B. Woodruff (eds), *Reason and Religion in Socratic Philosophy* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 30–37. This does not explain, however, that Socrates' claims refer to an internal divine force that is private to him, which may well have been the occasion for the accusation of 'not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things' (*Apol.* 24b–c). This accusation would be hard to understand if the interventions were those of Apollo, as referring to a rather conventional view of divine possession. It is furthermore remarkable that this *daimonion*

7.2 Celestial and Traditional Gods

If Plato's image of the gods can be shown to be very much in line with traditional accounts, then what of his allegedly astral theology? Isn't this a step outside the tradition?

Our answer to this needs to be nuanced. In the *Timaeus*, the celestial gods are discussed as 'the visible and generated gods' (*Tim.* 40d), alongside the traditional gods and with no apparent connection between the two classes. In the *Laws* Book X, where the traditional gods are not referred to, there is also no hint that its account of what has been called 'natural theology' comes to replace the traditional accounts. Nor is it so straightforward, by the way, that *Laws X* is meant to introduce astral theology. Rather, this book lays the ground for proving that the gods exist, on the basis of the argument that cosmic order can only be explained by the presence of divine (rational) souls in it. The closest we come to genuinely astral theology is in the spurious *Epinomis*, probably written by Plato's disciple Philippos of Opus.

On the other hand, Plato does make a link between the gods and the planets in his etymology of the word θεός:

It seems to me that the first inhabitants of Greece believed only in those gods in which many foreigners still believe today – the sun, moon, earth, stars, and sky. And, seeing that these were always moving or running, they gave them the name 'theoi' because it was their nature to run (*thein*). Later, when they learned about the other gods, they called them all by that name. (*Cratylus* 397c–d, tr. C.D.C. Reeve)

As ever in the *Cratylus*, it is hard to determine how seriously this etymology is meant to be taken, yet it does indicate that Plato envisaged the celestial bodies as gods. How do they relate, then, to his traditional gods? It is in any case striking that the planets, the names of which are – perhaps surprisingly – hardly ever mentioned by Plato, are always referred to in the genitive: Διός for the planet Jupiter, Ἀφροδίτης for Venus, Ἑρμοῦ for Mercury, and so forth.⁶⁸ This seems to imply that the gods

is exclusively linked to Socrates. Plato does recognize the existence of personal daemons that accompany the dead to the place where they will be judged (*Phaedo* 107d–e), but this is hardly comparable to what Socrates' divine sign is doing. The *daimonion* is thus a wondrous privilege of Socrates, and not a god of the Platonic pantheon. See my 'Socrates' Daemon: Internalisation of the Divine and Knowledge of the Self', *Apeiron: a Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science*, 38 (2005), pp. 31–42.

⁶⁸ See *Tim.* 38d: 'He set the Moon in the first circle, around the earth, and the Sun in the second, above it. The Dawnbearer (ἑωσφόρον, i.e., Venus) and the star said to be sacred to Hermes (τὸν ἱερὸν Ἑρμοῦ) he set to run in circles that equal the Sun's in speed, though they received the power contrary to its power. As a result, the Sun, the star of Hermes (ὁ τοῦ Ἑρμοῦ) and the Dawnbearer (ἑωσφόρος) alike overtake and are overtaken by one another.' (tr. D.J. Zeyl). Also in the *Epinomis*, the names of the planets are mentioned only in the

are not really identified with the planets, but that they are indicated as *having* a celestial body rather than *being* it, thus suggesting that the gods' existence is not limited to the celestial bodies *per se*. This may also be the point of Plato's analysis of the way in which the sun is moved by a soul (*Laws* X, 898e–899a), as discussed in the previous section of this chapter. In line with Plato's statement that some gods present themselves to us as they like (*Tim.* 41a), one might then surmise that the celestial gods – who, after all, bear the same names as (some of) the traditional ones – are only one possible corporeal presentation of these gods, the souls of which may manifest themselves to us in many different ways.

This means, I take it, that it would be too simplistic to state that Plato is replacing the traditional gods with celestial ones, or that his theology is based on astral religion. The traditional gods are playing a more important role, and the celestial gods are linked more closely to the traditional ones, than many commentators have argued. The celestial bodies are certain appearances of gods, but they do not exhaust these gods' essential nature. The gods have different modes of appearance, which may link them to planets, but also to anthropomorphic descriptions.

genitive. See *Epin.* 987b–c 'They [the planets] have taken as their appellations the names of the gods. The morning star, which is also the evening star, is accounted as Aphrodite's star (ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἑωσφόρος ἔσπερός τε ὢν αὐτὸς Ἀφροδίτης εἶναι) ... The star that more or less accompanies both the sun and Aphrodite's is Hermes' (ὁ δ' ὁμόδρομος ἡλίῳ τε ἅμα καὶ τούτῳ σχεδὸν Ἑρμοῦ). ... Of the remaining three stars, one is particularly slow, and some call it by the name "Cronus"' (Κρόνου δ' αὐτὸν τινες ἐπωνυμίαν φθέγγονται). The next slowest we should call Zeus' (τὸν δὲ μετὰ τοῦτον βραδυτῆτι λέγειν χρὴ Διός), and the next one Ares' (Ἄρεως δὲ ὁ μετὰ τοῦτον); this one has the reddest color of them all.' (tr. R.D. McKirahan, Jr.). See also Aristotle, *Metaph.* XII 8, 1073b31–35. Cf. Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, p. 103 fn. 61.

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Chapter 3

Theology and Metaphysics

1 Introduction

The question of how Plato's gods fit with his metaphysics is highly debated. Michael Bordt, whose views we will be discussing in this chapter, provides a fairly complete *status quaestionis* on Plato's theology in general,¹ which we may briefly summarize here, adapting it to our new question. Bordt subdivides interpretations into three groups. The first he calls the *metaphysical interpretation*, which holds that Plato's (supreme) god is identical with his highest metaphysical principle – either the Form of the Good, or another principle, which Plato may put forward in the context of the different dialogues.² The second group is brought under the heading of *cosmological interpretation*. Its proponents read Plato's theology starting from the fact that Plato's gods are souls who are not to be identified with metaphysical principles, but are

¹ Michael Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, Symposium, 126 (Munich, 2006), pp. 21–41.

² Those whom Bordt names as endorsing the metaphysical reading are Eduard Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, vol. II pt 1: *Sokrates und die Sokratiker – Platon und die alte Akademie* (4th ed., Leipzig, 1889), Léon Robin, *Platon*, second edition (Paris, 1968), Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Platon*, vol. I (Berlin, 1920), Paul Friedländer, *Platon*, vol. I (Berlin-Leipzig, 1928), Constantin Ritter, *Platon*, vol. II (Munich, 1923), Cornelia de Vogel, 'What was God for Plato?', in *Philosophia* (Assen, 1970), pp. 210–42, who all consider the Platonic god to be the Form of the Good; Hans J. Krämer, *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles. Zum Wesen und zur Geschichte der platonischen Ontologie* (Heidelberg, 1959), who identifies god with the Good and the One, and Lloyd Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy: Studies in the Early History of Natural Theology* (London and New York, 1990), who states that Plato's god, as any philosopher's god, is the result of the philosopher's quest for the highest principle. Furthermore, Auguste Diès (*Autour de Platon* (Paris, 1927) and 'Le dieu de Platon', in *Autour d'Aristote. Recueil d'études de philosophie ancienne et médiévale, offert à Monseigneur A. Mansion* (Leuven, 1955), pp. 61–7), Willem J. Verdenius, 'Platons Gottesbegriff', in *Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique*, vol. 1: *La notion du divin depuis Homère jusqu'à Platon* (Geneva, 1954), pp. 241–83, and Markus Enders, 'Platons "Theologie": Der Gott, die Götter und das Gute', *Perspektiven der Philosophie. Neues Jahrbuch*, 25 (1999), pp. 131–85, identify god or the gods with the Forms, who either cognize themselves (Verdenius and Enders) or are cognized by the Demiurge who represents the divine intellect as part of the Model (Diès, *Autour de Platon*); one may add Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos* (Munich and Leipzig, 2004), as proposing the same argument: see below, pp. 84–6). Finally, A.-J. Festugière, *Contemplation et vie contemplative selon Platon* (Paris, 1936), considers Plato's theology to be essentially mystical, aiming at an ascent to god (i.e., the Form of the Good or the One).

subordinated to them in one way or another.³ The third interpretation is the *religious* one, which stresses that Plato wants to purify the traditional religion of the *polis*, and that he tends to make a philosophical case for the Mystery cults, in which the soul and its relation to the gods play the central role.⁴

³ Adherents of the cosmological interpretation include Victor Brochard, 'Le devenir dans la philosophie de Platon', *Bibliothèque du Congrès International de philosophie de 1900*, IV (1900), pp. 103–27 (repr. *Etudes de philosophie ancienne et de philosophie moderne* (Paris, 1954), pp. 95–112), and 'Les mythes dans la philosophie de Platon', *L'Année philosophique*, 11 (1900; published 1901), pp. 1–13 (repr. *Etudes de philosophie ancienne et de philosophie moderne* (Paris, 1954), pp. 46–59), who considers the Demiurge to be Plato's supreme god. He is subordinated to the Forms, and thus, the god is not almighty. Yet the Greeks would not have any difficulty with that, as Zeus' power is always seen as superseded by fate. God is, furthermore, identical with intellect (νοῦς), which does not exist without a soul. In his investigation into the evolution of Plato's theology, Pierre Bovet, *Le dieu de Platon d'après l'ordre chronologique des dialogues* (Geneva and Paris, 1902), comes to the conclusion that the early and middle dialogues do not make any connection between metaphysics and religion, and that Plato, even though purifying religion, remains within the horizon of the popular religious beliefs. In the later dialogues, to the contrary, Plato does establish a connection between theology and metaphysics: god, the creator of the universe, is a perfect soul who mediates between the Forms and the sensible world. Bordt also refers to Friedrich Solmsen, *Plato's Theology*, Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, XXVII. Ithaca, NY, 1942, for whom see below, p. 63, fn. 5, and Franco Ferrari, 'Theologia', in Mario Vegetti (ed.), *Platone: La Repubblica. Traduzione e commento* (Napoli, 1998), vol. II, pp. 403–25, as endorsing a cosmological interpretation. Ferrari holds that god is not a metaphysical principle, although Plato's theology is closely connected to his metaphysics. God is good, as the cause of goodness in the cosmos and in the *polis*. Thus, Plato transfers the characteristics of the Form of the Good to the God, who makes them operable in the societal structure of the *polis*. Bordt adds to the list the interpretations of Reginald Hackforth, 'Plato's Theism', *Classical Quarterly*, 30 (1936), pp. 439–47 and Stephen Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, Journal of the History of Philosophy Monographs Series (Carbondale, 1995) which, as we shall argue, are in fact 'metaphysical'. The view that underlies the cosmological interpretation, viz. that god must be a soul, and that he should not be taken as an ultimate principle, was also emphasized by others, even though they did not all venture to render a systematized interpretation of Plato's theology. In fact, most of them denied that all contradictions and difficulties could ever be overcome. Thus, e.g., John Burnet, *Greek Philosophy from Thales to Plato* (London, 1914), Alfred E. Taylor, *Plato: the Man and His Work* (London, 6th ed., 1949), Paul Shorey, *What Plato Said* (Chicago, 1934), Francis M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato translated with a running commentary* (London, 1937) and David Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford, 1951). One may add Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy* (Baltimore, 1944) as an opponent to the thesis that intellect exists outside soul, and Clodius Piat, 'Dieu, d'après Platon', *Revue néo-scholastique*, 12, n. 47 (1905), pp. 194–206 and pp. 306–15, as an adherent of the thesis that the World-soul is the Platonic god, even though his interpretation jumps to conclusions about the vicinity and parallels between the Platonic and the Christian god.

⁴ Bordt refers to Solmsen (*Plato's Theology*) and Michael L. Morgan, *Platonic Piety: Philosophy and Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens* (New Haven and London, 1990), who

When applied to our question of the relation between Plato's metaphysics and theology, the third group does not really constitute a distinct interpretation. A 'religious' reading is, rather, a hermeneutic key through which one comes to hold to some variant of the cosmological or the metaphysical reading. An answer to the question 'In what sense does Plato purify religion?', or 'In which way does he integrate the Mystery cults?', will prove decisive for a 'religious' interpreter opting for one of the other two groups.⁵ On the other hand, though highly valuable and nearly exhaustive, Bordt's categorization is not entirely accurate. He classifies as 'cosmological' a strain of interpretation that is in fact plainly metaphysical. Reginald Hackforth's and Stephen Menn's identification of god with intellect, νοῦς, is considered to be a variant of the cosmological interpretation. Yet their denial that god is a soul, complemented with the statement that Plato's god is an intellect (νοῦς) which exists separately from the soul, implies that they introduce the intellect (νοῦς) as a metaphysical principle (or as Menn has it, a 'metaphysical hypothesis'). Hence, we must treat Menn's and Hackforth's – and one could add, Brisson's⁶ – interpretation as metaphysical.

The interpretation I shall propose may be seen as falling under Bordt's 'cosmological' heading, even though it will display a number of differences from the interpretations he lists in that group. Against interpretations à la Brochard, I shall argue, for instance, that Plato did not accept one single god (the Demiurge or intellect) as supreme, and separate from all other gods.⁷ Nor do I believe that

points out that Plato's theology should be read in the context of the history Greece and of Greek religion.

⁵ The 'religious' interpretation is articulated on the basis of Solmsen (*Plato's Theology*), who proposes four 'approaches' to Plato's theology: (1) the expurgation of religious beliefs, (2) Plato's philosophy of movement, (3) the teleological approach, and (4) the influence of Mystery religions. Bordt agrees that Solmsen represents a cosmological interpretation on the basis of (2) and (3): according to approach (2) god is a soul who transmits movement to the world; in approach (3) Plato's cosmology is based on the existence of a god (the Demiurge) who brings order into the sensible realm. Solmsen claims that these approaches are only loosely connected, and that Plato leaves them side by side. Yet, on the other hand, in Solmsen's own interpretation the Mystery cults (which receive attention in four pages only), and even the purification ('expurgation') of religious beliefs do not contradict the principles laid down in approaches (2) and (3). But Solmsen does point out that for Plato (and for Plato as the last one in the Greek world), religion ought to be discussed in the context of a political system (Solmsen, *Plato's Theology*, p. 177). Thus, according to Solmsen, the *polis* sets the stage for understanding the cosmos and religion, and cosmology provides the basis for law.

⁶ Luc Brisson, *Le même et l'autre dans la structure ontologique du Timée de Platon: Un commentaire systématique du Timée de Platon* (Paris, 1974), argues that the Demiurge is 'not a person, but a function' (p. 32), and then adds that the Demiurge represents the separate intellect that governs the universe (p. 84).

⁷ Brochard ('Le devenir dans la philosophie de Platon', pp. 95–8) accepts that Plato's god is not the highest in the universe (like the old traditional gods were submitted to fate),

Plato's theology stands totally apart from his metaphysics. On the other hand, Brochard's idea that the relation between metaphysics and theology can be read in terms of the traditional gods' being subordinate to fate is very fruitful, and it will constitute the core of my interpretation. We shall obviously have to return to this.

The 'cosmological' interpretation does not seem to have had many recent defenders. After a certain 'boost' of this strain of interpretation in the first decades of the twentieth century, most recent commentators opt for a metaphysical reading. We shall therefore need to articulate the metaphysical interpretation as a backdrop against which this chapter, and indeed the whole book, is conceived.

2 'De-Aristotelianizing' Plato's Theology

In the introduction to Chapter 2,⁸ I sketched the general atmosphere within which pre-Platonic philosophers came to theological matters: doubting the existence of the gods was not common practice, even in the most enlightened periods of ancient Greek culture. Hence, when philosophers came to explain the cosmos and its inherent principles, the gods were to play an important role in their accounts. Famously, Parmenides attributes the discovery of his monistic ontology (in which, in principle, there could hardly be a place for polytheism) to a revelation by a goddess.⁹ And there are other famous examples, including, of course, Plato and Socrates. Plato has his master say, just before he is put to death on charges of godlessness:

Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget.
(*Phaedo* 118a, tr. G.M.A. Grube)

This statement, of course, serves Plato's apologetic aims: it undermines Socrates' critics and accusers. But whatever the pretext or the historical circumstance may have been, it is clear that Plato wanted to show that the gods mattered to him and to his master.

The same could also be said of most of the later philosophical schools (including the Epicureans),¹⁰ and especially the Neoplatonists, who established a monistic metaphysical system, with the One Good as its sole principle, while still maintaining traditional religion, practicing the rites and ceremonies, and worshipping the plethora of Greek gods.

but he does see the Demiurge as Plato's highest god, beyond the gods, and yet below the Good and the Forms.

⁸ See above, pp. 25–30.

⁹ Parmenides, fr. 1.

¹⁰ Epicurus held that the gods do not care about us, but he did not deny the existence of the gods.

This adherence of ancient philosophers to religious belief is not easily understood, especially not when their philosophical vocation lies in arguing that the world is governed by principles that appear to be independent of theological insights or religious beliefs.

In Chapter 2, we made a case that Plato's theology is framed by certain patterns, in which the general claim that the gods are good plays a central role. In a philosophical system like Plato's, this automatically raises the question of how the gods (theology) relate to 'the Good' – taking goodness not just as a pattern for theology, but as a general metaphysical principle that determines the existence of the gods. Goodness would not just be a rule in speaking about the gods, but would become a principle of the gods' being. It is clear, then, that Plato will have to answer the question of how the gods relate to the Good, which is to say, how theology relates to metaphysics.

This question as such was treated for the first time by Aristotle and, as I will try to show, the answer provided by Aristotle has brought a certain bias to the way in which the question was applied to Aristotle's predecessors (including Plato). It is clear that, in Aristotle's view, theology and metaphysics converge. Aristotle's First Philosophy is famously defined in two ways: as the study of being *qua* being, and as theology, namely the study of the highest being.¹¹ It might be the case, as argued by Richard Bodéüs,¹² that Aristotle's theology was more traditional, and less 'metaphysical' than the later Aristotelian tradition has made it appear. Without wishing to discuss this problematic in all its details, it is important to see how, at least in the Aristotelian tradition (or should we say, the traditional reading of Aristotle?), theology becomes part of the metaphysical project. The god's being (and the singular of 'god' is all important) is a privileged entryway to understanding being as such. God, so to speak, reveals in himself all aspects of being in its highest mode of existence. He will be pure act, pure form, perfect entelechy, the highest performance of the highest activity (self-thinking thought), and the ultimate final cause.¹³ In this way, god becomes a metaphysical principle himself, playing a central role in the structure of the universe: all things will have an inherent longing for this final cause, which has set them into motion. Hence, even though many important issues are under discussion, and the preceding lines fall short of any nuanced vision, it is not inappropriate to say that the Aristotelian metaphysical system is completed by what is called 'god' – the god of philosophers, that is: a god who instantiates the highest mode of being. We could perhaps call this endeavour 'metaphysical monotheism': the whole project of Aristotelian metaphysics culminates in singling out the highest being as that which instantiates the highest metaphysical principles in the purest and most perfect way. The highest object of metaphysics *is* God.

¹¹ Arist., *Metaph.* VI 1, 1026a23–32.

¹² Richard Bodéüs, *Aristote et la théologie des vivants immortels* (Montréal and Paris, 1992).

¹³ Arist., *Metaph.* XII 7, 1072b1–30.

Now, this Aristotelian perspective has been transplanted to the study of Plato's theology. Its implicit starting point is that metaphysics and theology are allies in answering one and the same question. That is to say, Plato's gods are referred to not only in formulating the question, 'What role do the gods play in the metaphysical structure of the universe?', but also in answering it: the Platonic god, just as the Aristotelian one, is now seen *as* a metaphysical principle. And one will have noticed the transition to the singular again: in this way of treating the question, Plato's theology will be singularized, as having one ('highest' or exemplary) god whose existence coincides with a metaphysical principle, thus again yielding a 'metaphysical monotheism'. Depending on what is emphasized, some interpreters identify Plato's god with the Good, others with intellect, still others with the Demiurge, or with the Forms,¹⁴ whereby the relationship between the different metaphysical entities is to be further determined.

This, I shall argue, is a thoroughly Aristotelian reading, which does justice neither to Plato's genuine endeavours nor to the undeniable and often unexplained presence of a multitude of gods in his works. It is true that Plato himself very often uses the word 'god' in the singular, and that this may be an indication of a shifting understanding of the divine. But, in itself, this is insufficient evidence for the monotheistic claim that is made by the Aristotelian tradition. The discussion in the previous chapter has shown that Plato tends to use 'the god' as a generic name or a common denominator for all that is divine.¹⁵ It is a shortcut, used to discuss the qualities of all things divine in general, rather than a statement about there being only one God.

It is clear that the situation is more complex than this, and that there are monotheistic tendencies in Plato as well,¹⁶ but, as we shall see, his theology is not identical with his metaphysics. It would be anachronistic to read Plato's theology in this Aristotelian vein. Rather, as I shall argue, we find in Plato a view on the gods that is closely akin to the doctrines of the tragic poets and, for that matter, of traditional religious belief. The gods, in this traditional view, are individually existing beings who have a certain impact on the world, but who are subject to forces that govern the universe. Gods cannot alter fate or change necessity. They

¹⁴ See, as recent examples, Bordt, *Platons Theologie* (god as the Idea of the Good), Menn, *Plato on God as Nous* (god as intellect), Luc Brisson, 'Le corps des dieux', in Jérôme Laurent (ed.), *Les dieux de Platon* (Caen, 2003), p. 22 (god as the Demiurge) and Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, pp. 127–38 (god as the Forms), alongside those mentioned at p. 61, fn. 2.

¹⁵ See above, pp. 36–8.

¹⁶ For instance, the figure of Zeus seems to become a super-god, standing above all the other gods. Besides, the generalizing speaking about the gods (by using the singular, or by attributing common characteristics to them all), and the reference to personifications like the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*, and the divine checkers-player in the *Laws* (X, 903d) allows for a recognition of monotheistic tendencies. But as I will try to argue, they are much weaker than commonly held in literature.

are bound by the ruling force of fate (εἰμαρμένη).¹⁷ In Plato, who was the first to elaborate a genuinely metaphysical system, this ruling force was replaced by the metaphysical principles (of the Good, and the intelligible realm of Being). The Platonic gods, on the other hand, remained individually existing beings who had their role to play in the world, and who were themselves subject to the forces that govern the world. The gods' existence thus presupposes the metaphysical structure of the world. They fall under the action radius of 'higher' forces – as they had in earlier poets and philosophers – but those forces are now seen as genuinely metaphysical principles.¹⁸

The Aristotelianizing interpretation of Plato's theology typically has reference to a set of standard texts, the most important of which are the final pages of *Republic* VI (the transcendence of the Idea of the Good) and the *Timaeus* (the constitution of the gods by the divine Demiurge). The latter dialogue occupies a position of tremendous importance for us: because it is the only dialogue in which Plato presents an encompassing view on cosmology, it has been taken by most commentators as the privileged pathway to unravelling Plato's views on the gods and the role of the divine in the constitution of the universe. From this perspective, it is tempting, and understandably so, to see the Demiurge and his creative activity as Plato's most elaborate answer to the question of how the divine operates. The *Timaeus* presents Plato's rationalized view on theology, displaying his most mature reaction against traditional conceptions of the gods. And because of this, many interpreters have read Plato's alleged theology in the *Timaeus* as a clear attempt to substitute traditional religious views with a philosophical theology in which the supreme divine force is seen as a metaphysical principle of intellect (νοῦς), or as a manifestation of the metaphysical principle of the Good, or as both together.

I want to challenge these Aristotelianizing interpretations by arguing, on the one hand, that the *Timaeus* does not offer us a straightforward theology, but rather a narrative on the personified function of intellect that characterizes all divine souls. On the other hand, I will try to show, from the *Timaeus* and other dialogues (*Phaedrus*, *Laws*), that Plato's metaphysical principles are not gods, but that his gods are nevertheless subordinated to these principles.

¹⁷ Cf. Brochard, 'Le devenir dans la philosophie de Platon', and 'Les mythes dans la philosophie de Platon'. Bordt (*Platons Theologie*, p. 33 fn. 52) expresses doubt as to whether the gods were always seen as subordinated to fate. However, if a counter-example can be found in one or the other author, it does not destroy the thesis. The argument hinges on the statement that it is *conceivable* for Greeks that the gods are subordinated to fate (which is certainly so), which would then immediately make them understand how Plato's gods are subordinated to metaphysical principles.

¹⁸ Cf. Brochard, 'Les mythes dans la philosophie de Platon', p. 58: 'On est ainsi amené, prenant au pied de la lettre les textes ou les mythes du *Timée*, à considérer le démiurge ou le dieu de Platon comme un être inférieur et dérivé, subordonné aux Idées exactement comme le Jupiter de la religion grecque est subordonné au *fatum*, à cette différence près que, dans le système du philosophe grec, ce qui domine la divinité n'est plus une force aveugle et sourde, mais au contraire le suprême intelligible et la suprême perfection.'

In order to do so, we need first to investigate the relation between intellect and soul. For indeed, having ascertained, in Chapter 2, that the gods exist as souls, we now need to settle the question of whether intellect is a metaphysical principle or an individualized being. Most metaphysical readers of Plato's theology have argued that the intellect is a separate metaphysical principle. The logic of their interpretation renders this necessary: since the characterization of the god(s) as intellect (νοῦς) is taken to be omnipresent in Plato, they are forced to bring this together with his highest metaphysical principle, the Good.

In line with this, the metaphysical interpretation of Plato's theology also requires that the intellect be a being on its own, independent of other beings, and hence, that intellect can exist without soul. This point has been debated a number of times,¹⁹ and the vigour with which the independent existence of intellect is defended reveals the essential importance of this assumption for the metaphysical interpretation. For indeed: how could god be what he is – the highest principle of the universe – if he could only exist within a soul?

3 Soul and Intellect (Νοῦς)

If Plato's gods can be proven to be souls, this by no means settles all questions that surround his theology. It would be conceivable, and in fact it is taken for granted in many works on Plato, that he subordinates the gods to other principles, which should then be taken as more important divinities. A particular point of debate in the interpretation of Plato's theology is the question of whether intellect (νοῦς) can exist separately from a soul. The metaphysical (Aristotelianizing) reading of Plato's theology sees the demiurgic intellect as a (or indeed, the supreme) god in Plato's system, guiding and ruling the whole universe as a metaphysical entity. This intellect precedes the gods and exists apart from them, as a separate, supra-psychic principle.

We shall proceed in this section by first briefly surveying what the word 'intellect' (νοῦς) means in Plato. We will then investigate how intellect (νοῦς) is presented in Plato's metaphysical interpreters, before turning again to his texts and presenting an alternative, less metaphysical, reading of intellect in the *Timaeus* and elsewhere. In a further step, we shall argue that Plato's dialogues do not support the thesis that intellect can exist separately from soul. And finally, we will analyze the most relevant passages that reveal how all divine functions of intellect in Plato are in fact performed by souls endowed with intellect. This will pave the way for the presentation of our own interpretation of the relation between theology and metaphysics, in the next section.

¹⁹ The emblematic discussion on this issue is the one between Hackforth ('Plato's Theism'), who argues that intellect exists independently from soul, and Cherniss (*Aristotle's Criticism of Plato*), who emphasizes the dependence of intellect on soul.

3.1 The Meaning of Νοῦς ('Intellect')

Before taking on the discussion of whether Plato's god is 'intellect' (νοῦς), we should first try to put our finger on what he actually meant by this word, νοῦς.²⁰ It is clear that the term has different meanings and connotations according to the context in which it appears. Yet there seem to be two large sets of meanings, which are obviously intertwined. The first sees intellect (νοῦς) as the activity of knowing the Forms. In that sense, it is a cognitive act, closely akin to knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) or wisdom/understanding (φρόνησις), to which it is often connected. Thus, for instance, in the *Philebus* constant reference is made to the dyad 'intellect and understanding' (νοῦς καὶ φρόνησις),²¹ apparently considering them to be geminating synonyms. The situation is similar in other dialogues.²² It is safe to say, on this evidence, that the distinctions between these several terms are not to be exaggerated, and that they all by and large refer to the same activity, namely that of 'looking at' or contemplating true being (as in the case of *Phaedrus* 247c–d, mentioned above, p. 50). It can refer to contemplating becoming, but this is mostly to be taken *ex negativo*, that is, to deny this possibility and contrast it with the right form of contemplation.²³ That contemplation is an activity, however, and not a power, seems very clear. It has been remarked that intellect (νοῦς) is never mentioned as a synonym of λόγος, which – apart from its obvious reference to 'the word', discourse, or speech – has the connotation of rational powers with which a rational soul is endowed;²⁴ while in certain other contexts, intellect (νοῦς) is described as actual 'thinking'.²⁵

Over against this 'cognitive' meaning, in which intellect (νοῦς) faces its objects and discovers them as objects of thought, there is a meaning in which intellect is active, less in contemplating than in creating order. In this sense of the word, intellect imposes the order of the intelligible world onto the sensible realm; and this is the 'demiurgic' intellect, which is most prominent in the *Timaeus*, but to which reference is also made elsewhere. It is this meaning of intellect (νοῦς) which

²⁰ Cf. J.H.M.M. Loenen, *De nous in het systeem van Plato's filosofie* (Amsterdam, 1951), pp. 77–95.

²¹ *Phil.* 11b, 22a, 28d, 58d, 59d, 63c, 65e, 66b. With knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) as third term: *Phil.* 13e, 21d, 28a.

²² E.g. *Euthd.* 281b; *Soph.* 249c; *Tim.* 34a, 46e; *Laws* I, 631c contains a list of the divine benefits, in which understanding (φρόνησις) is the highest one, followed by the 'habitual self-control of a soul that uses reason' (μετὰ νοῦ σώφρων ψυχῆς ἕξις) in the second position. In this case also, 'understanding' is taken as a synonym of 'intellect', which refers to the presence of the first benefit within the second. See also *Laws* III, 688b. Cf. Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 15–16.

²³ *Laws* X, 897b–d; *Tim.* 27d–29d; 30c–32b.

²⁴ Cf. Loenen, *De nous in het systeem van Plato's filosofie*, p. 85–7; also Alfred E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* (Oxford, 1928), p. 62; Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 14.

²⁵ See, e.g., *Rep.* VI, 490b; *Phaedo* 79d; *Tim.* 37b–c.

Plato found in Anaxagoras: a mind or intellect that orders the world, presumably by its act of thinking. In this use of the term, 'intellect' stands for the force that brings order in the universe.

With regard to this intellect, Plato's works contain a traceable development of his ideas. In the *Phaedo*, Plato dismisses the principle of intellect, conceived of in an Anaxagorean manner, as only explaining the physiological conditions for the operation of truly metaphysical principles, and as having no further use in Anaxagoras' own system.²⁶ When, however, in later dialogues such as the *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, *Sophist* and *Laws*, Plato challenges himself to explain his cosmological views, the intellect becomes an all-important feature in the generation of the universe. What has happened in between is that Plato seems to have realized that he needed to explain how his metaphysical principles could be applied and transmitted to all constituents of the cosmos. This is no 'return to Anaxagoras', but rather a renewed encounter with the intellect, now strongly framed within Plato's own theory of the Forms and of the Good, as elaborated in the dialogues of his middle period. Those principles provide the final explanation of being that was lacking in Anaxagoras' theory, while the intellect can now be safely integrated into the structure of Plato's generated universe.²⁷

The two meanings of intellect (νοῦς) are interwoven, as we have already indicated. The demiurgic intellect will have to think (or contemplate) the Forms in order to be able to transmit order to the lower realms. Moreover, the cognitive intellect is by its nature inclined towards the higher, not the lower (see the passages referred to on p. 69, fn. 23, where it becomes clear that Plato sees the operation of intellect as directed towards Being rather than to Becoming).

3.2 Can Intellect (Νοῦς) Be the Platonic God ?

Concerning Plato's cognitive intellect, there is a broad consensus that its existence is linked to soul; in order to be able to think, there must be something that is alive and capable of self-motion, which are the characteristics of a soul.²⁸

There is no consensus, however, concerning the question of whether Plato's demiurgic intellect also presupposes soul, or whether it exists as a supra-psyche, metaphysical principle in the intelligible world. That it is indeed such a principle is the basic assumption of the metaphysical interpretation of Plato's theology. What its adherents are looking for is thus intellect as a being that exists in the intelligible world (or beyond it), *not* just as an intelligible Form that is participated in by sensible things, but as an intelligible principle that is at the same time thinking (i.e., contemplating the Forms) and acting upon its insight by transmitting the order of the intelligible world to the sensible realm. As I shall argue, the former

²⁶ *Phaedo* 97b–99c.

²⁷ Cf. Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 5: 'The later dialogues in general share the *Philebus*' concern to account for sensibles as well as for intelligibles.'

²⁸ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, pp. 14–18.

conception – that intellect, νοῦς, is a Form that is participated in by souls – may easily be seen to be compatible with what Plato does say about the Forms, even though it is never put forward explicitly. The latter option, however, seems to raise more problems than it solves.

The interpretation that holds that Plato's god is a supra-psychic, metaphysical entity, was authoritatively put forward in two recent monographs, which we shall discuss here as paradigmatic for what Michael Bordt – as we have seen – calls the metaphysical interpretation of Plato's theology. In his book, *Plato on God as Nous*, Stephen Menn does exactly what his title says: he makes a case for the thesis that νοῦς (intellect) is Plato's god.²⁹ Published a decade later, Bordt's, *Platons Theologie*, proceeds along the lines laid out by Menn, but brings the interpretation a step further: according to Bordt, the ultimate Platonic god is the intellect, which is identical with the Idea of the Good.³⁰

3.2.1 Stephen Menn's Interpretation

Stephen Menn's central idea is that, in Plato, the principle of intellect (νοῦς) is the cause of order in the universe. Intellect plays this role by deriving order from the intelligible Model, as described in the *Timaeus*. Since this task is indeed fulfilled by the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*, the Demiurge is the Platonic intellect, and thus he is *the* Platonic god. According to Menn, the Demiurge is 'not a mere myth but a metaphysical hypothesis as dear to Plato as the forms',³¹ and as such, he exists 'apart from the bodies and souls he creates, immune from their conflicts and capable of imposing order upon them'.³² Thus, according to Menn, the Platonic intellect or god is a metaphysical principle that has its own position in the Platonic system, and that operates separately from any other principle. Menn stresses the fact that the terms in which intellect is discussed are the same as those used for the Forms. Plato uses the terminology of participation, as in the following text:

All human beings must be said to share in the former [i.e., in true opinion], but in intellect (νοῦς) the gods share, and the human race just a little. (*Tim.* 51e5–6, tr. Menn, modified)

Living beings, humans as well as gods, are said to 'share' or 'participate' (μετέχειν) in the intellect – which is far from saying that gods would be *identical* with intellect. Rather, as Menn points out, this indicates that 'νοῦς' is a virtue, 'that by possessing which someone thinks rightly or is in accordance with reason'.³³ That is to say, 'νοῦς' is a mode of the functionality of reason, a mode that is reached when the soul's rational powers are operating in the right way.

²⁹ Stephen Menn, *Plato on God as Nous* (Carbondale, 1995).

³⁰ Michael Bordt, *Platons Theologie* (Munich, 2006).

³¹ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 10.

³² Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, pp. 12–13.

³³ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 15.

Menn is certainly right in pointing out that 'νοῦς' is a virtue. In fact, the evidence is overwhelming that 'νοῦς' is something the soul 'has' (for which, accordingly, Plato uses the verbs ἔχειν, 'to have', and λαγχάνειν or κτᾶσθαι, 'to acquire').³⁴ Intellect is a characteristic, which distinguishes its possessor from things that lack reason. It is thus the excellence of thought that is to be found in the virtuous soul, as in the following text:

Well then, what kind of soul may we say has gained control of the heavens and earth and their entire cycle of movement? Is it the rational and supremely virtuous kind (τὸ φρόνιμον καὶ ἀρετῆς πλήρες), or that which has neither advantage? (*Laws* X, 897b, tr. T.J. Saunders, author's insertion)

As Menn³⁵ points out, Plato's phrase 'rational and supremely virtuous' takes up the idea that the soul 'cleaves to divine intellect' (νοῦν προσλαβοῦσα, earlier on in 897b), thus linking the presence of any kind of virtue with intellect (even though the formulation of 'that which has neither advantage', τὸ μηδέτερα κεκτημένον, indicates that there remains a difference between 'νοῦς' and the other virtues). This also underlies the repeated combination of intellect (νοῦς) with knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) and/or understanding (φρόνησις), which we previously discussed.³⁶ One could also add *Laws* XII, 963a (where 'νοῦς' is the highest virtue of four), to be read together with 965d (where the four virtues are listed as 'courage, restraint, justice and wisdom': ἀνδρεία καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ δικαιοσύνη καὶ φρόνησις).³⁷

Menn argues that if 'νοῦς' is a virtue, it must exist on the level of the Forms, as 'a virtue in which souls participate'.³⁸ Again, that is sound Platonism: Menn correctly points out that 'Plato notoriously believes that the virtues exist themselves by themselves, independent of whether any human or divine soul ever participates in them'.³⁹ In a discussion of passages where Plato denies that intellect can exist apart from soul (to which we shall return in detail below),⁴⁰ Menn correctly points out that Plato actually says that intellect cannot 'become' or 'come to be' outside of soul. According to Menn, this does not mean that intellect cannot exist outside soul, but rather that its true existence (not its 'becoming') is to be sought outside the world of Becoming. He refers to a similar point regarding life (ζωή), which is thematized alongside the intellect at *Sophist* 249a as something the soul *has*. And the *Phaedo* talks about the Form of life (αὐτὸ τὸ τῆς ζωῆς εἶδος, *Phaedo* 106d5–6) in which the soul partakes, and which guarantees the soul's immortality. It might thus be the case that there is a Form of intellect, which is a virtue shared in by

³⁴ The examples quoted by Menn are *Phil.* 55b and *Tim.* 30b.

³⁵ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 18.

³⁶ Cf. above, p. 69.

³⁷ Cf. Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 16.

³⁸ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 18.

³⁹ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ See below, pp. 87–95.

rational souls, just like there is a Form of life. Likewise, as a Form, the intellect participated in by soul could be seen as a ‘separate intelligible’ that is ‘not altered when we admit into reality also the changeable things that participate in them’.⁴¹

I think this is substantially right, but the use Menn makes of this argument reveals what is really at stake: Menn uses this to argue that the intellect ‘is not an individual soul (however divine this might be): it is rather the universal principle or virtue antithetical to the universal power of irrationality and randomness’.⁴² His whole argument about the intellect not being able to ‘come-to-be’ outside of soul is thus intended to show that the presence of intellect in soul does not preclude the possible existence of a transcendent *principle* of intellect outside the realm of soul. Thus, from the acceptance of intellect as a Form of virtue, Menn concludes that there is a transcendent intellect (νοῦς). I find it hard to see why, if ‘νοῦς’ can be shown to be a virtue, it must immediately be a ‘universal *principle*’.

Let us nevertheless suppose for a moment that this is the case, that there is a principle of intellect that exists separately from the intellect that is present in souls. For a start, Menn would have to acknowledge a substantial difference between the nature of ‘νοῦς’ as a separate being and as a participated virtue. The Form indicates a thing’s essential nature (in this case, ‘what it is to be intellect’), whereas the participating thing makes it operative in the world of becoming (in this case, ‘thinking’). For Menn to deny this, by describing the intellect (an intelligible Form) as a being or a principle that is itself intelligent, would cause at least two serious difficulties within Plato’s metaphysical scheme.

First, it would entail the problem that the Form of the intellect is not of the same kind as the other Forms. As I have said, Plato often indicates intellect (νοῦς) as that which sees or contemplates the Forms. It would be difficult, then, to understand how this contemplating entity is *itself* a Form. One would then have to accept an exceptional distinction in the intelligible world between the Form that is looked at by the intellect, and the intellect as a Form that is looking at the Forms. Aristotle would of course readily consider the soul’s intellectual activity to be the ‘form of forms’, but that is because, in his metaphysics, none of the forms has a separate existence in an intelligible realm. Plato’s dual metaphysical scheme requires that that which looks at the Forms be separate from the Forms themselves. If the intellect were really this exceptional Form, one would expect Plato to have said so explicitly. As it is, the only place where Plato may have had this in mind is in his description of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*; yet, as we will argue, the Demiurge taken literally entails even more exceptions to Plato’s metaphysics and ontology.

Second, Menn’s thesis that the Form of intellect (νοῦς) is actively thinking entails a strange view of the existence of the Form, and in this case, of participation. Let us take a more obvious and less controversial example: if all just persons and all just deeds in the sensible world can be shown to participate in the Form of justice, need we then ascribe the activity of doing justice to the Form of justice? In

⁴¹ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 22.

⁴² Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 17.

that case, the Form of justice would be an actor that *does* justice. Yet Plato, even in his most enthusiastic passages about the Forms, would not come to that conclusion. For him, the Forms are the intelligible structures that constitute the essential nature of things and that allow one to understand and explain, for instance, the justice of just deeds. Even though this amounts to the Forms' being real, this reality does not consist in their being *active* – as, say, just persons are. Or to put it in Aristotelian terms: Plato's Forms would refer to formal causality, not to efficient causes. In the case of life and intellect, this means that the Forms explain what it is to be 'alive' or 'thinking', but not that the Forms themselves think or live.⁴³ As Forms, they are what is thought or contemplated, not what thinks and contemplates. It is thus perfectly all right, in sound Platonism, to explain the existence of intellect in souls in terms of participating in a universal intellect that is a Form. This, however, only explains how thought would look in its formal aspects ('what it is to be thinking'); it does not entail that the activity of thinking is performed by the Form itself.

Menn admits that this is the case: 'it seems that on the present account, the demiurge is a form or idea; but he seems too active for an idea, and as we have seen, Plato posits him precisely to fill in the deficiencies of explanation through formal causality'.⁴⁴ When tackling this problem, Menn argues that intellect is a Form in the sense that it is a formal cause, like all other Forms, but that it also has a peculiar status that distinguishes it from the other Forms, namely that of being an efficient cause – of displaying the functions of the Demiurge (intellect) as described in the *Timaeus*.⁴⁵ This explanation again introduces an exceptional Form: demiurgic intellect is, for Menn, distinct from what one would find in any other Form. Intellect (νοῦς) would essentially be the act of contemplating or understanding the other Forms, *and* of organizing the entire order of participation.

After all, there is a palpable tension in Menn's analysis, which is due essentially to his application of Aristotelian schemes. In Aristotle, we clearly face a system in which the universe can be explained on the basis of self-thinking thought: the Intellect, which has as its sole activity to be thinking itself. If the Platonic intellect (νοῦς) is the Form of a virtue – according to Menn, 'not an act nor a power nor an object but the *habit* or *virtue* of *noein*'⁴⁶ – then who is doing the act of thinking? In Menn's view it would have to be (even though he does not say as much) an intellect that is virtuous by functioning in a perfect way. And that is indeed an Aristotelian pattern. In Plato, however, the case is different. The Form of a virtue is not itself active, and requires a different entity (the soul) to 'become' active. This tension between 'νοῦς' as a Form and 'νοῦς' as a thinking intellect leads Menn to a strange conclusion, namely, 'that the *nous* that God *is* is just the *nous* that these souls *have*

⁴³ This inference underlies the argument at *Sophist* 248a–250d, discussed below, pp. 88–9.

⁴⁴ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, pp. 43–59.

⁴⁶ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 15.

when they act according to reason'.⁴⁷ If that is true, then why should we conceive of Plato's god as anything but a mode of operation of certain souls?

I would therefore surmise that it is better to maintain the overall Platonic description of what it is to be a Form, and that, if intellect is shown to be such a Form ('what-it-is-to-be-thinking', as an intelligible object), it still does not explain how intellect *becomes*. That is to say, defining 'νοῦς' as the Form of a virtue does not take away the fact that virtue must be *done*, that instead of being an object of thought, it needs to *become* an act of thinking. That is why Plato explicitly links intellect to soul, as we shall see later on. The activity of thinking is bound to souls that have an intellect. Menn is thus absolutely right in pointing out what Plato literally says, namely that intellect can only *become* in souls. Yet one needs to add that this is what the *activity* of intellect would always presuppose: it can only be enacted by souls who perform the activity of thinking in a perfect way. In short, there is no thinking or creative intellect outside of soul.

That is to say that 'νοῦς' is a perfect activity ('virtue') which is present in some souls, without for that matter – and here I differ from Menn – being a metaphysical principle that acts on its own. Platonic intellect is the activity of knowing the intelligible Forms *as performed* by rational souls; the singular 'νοῦς' refers to the presence of this act of knowing in the various souls that are endowed with intellect.

3.2.2 Michael Bordt's Interpretation

Michael Bordt's *Platons Theologie* is the most recent book-length contribution to the study of Plato's conception of the divine. Bordt's argument runs along the lines of Stephen Menn's, but adds a number of observations, bearing particularly on the metaphysical foundations of theology. Bordt's interpretation dwells on Plato's first 'pattern for theology', which determines god as 'good'. This does not have to mean, says Bordt, that Plato's god is straightforwardly identical with his Form of the Good, as a number of commentators have surmised.⁴⁸ Yet, on the other hand, it cannot be the case that Platonic theology has nothing to do with the Form of the Good.⁴⁹ Bordt observes that, even though the Form of the Good is described in terms that are commonly reserved for descriptions of the gods, and though 'god' and 'the Good' are used as synonyms, Plato never explicitly identifies the two, while at the places in the *Republic* where he expounds his metaphysical principles,

⁴⁷ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 18.

⁴⁸ See the *status quaestionis* mentioned above, p. 61, fn. 2.

⁴⁹ Bordt (*Platons Theologie*, p. 146) ascribes this view to Solmsen, without giving a precise reference. However, it is not because Solmsen does not identify god with the Form of the Good that the two would have nothing to do with each other. See, e.g., Solmsen, *Plato's Theology*, p. 67: 'Plato has only one concept of perfection and excellent goodness; it is the same no matter whether applied to the gods, to politics, to education, art, or nature'; p. 118: 'The divinity of the Cosmos now rests on its orientation towards the Good, towards the realm of perfect Forms, and on the realization the Mind is at work in it': also pp. 100–101 and p. 108.

no mention is made of god as a first principle. Likewise, outside the *Republic*, no link is made between 'god' and the highest of Forms.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, according to Bordt, Plato suggests that god and the Form of the Good *are* identical. If the Form of the Good is the basic notion of Plato's metaphysics, and indeed his supreme metaphysical principle, then 'god cannot be different from the Good'.⁵¹ Bordt agrees that this does not mean that metaphysics *replaces* religion, not even in the case of the philosopher-king's religious attitudes and beliefs, but that the philosopher has a deepened understanding of the basic principles of religion. The religion of the *polis* and metaphysics each has its own set of expressions and terminology: 'in the religion of the polis no reference is made to the Idea of the Good, in metaphysics no mention is made of god'.⁵² Hence, metaphysics does not stand in the way of philosophers' participating in traditional cults, nor of their believing in gods.⁵³

Bordt thus clearly sets the stage of his interpretation: Plato's theology is to be read on the basis of the metaphysical schemes he elaborates.⁵⁴ Let it be clear that, at this stage of the argument, the interpretation rests on an as yet unproven supposition (*Vermutung*),⁵⁵ namely that god and the Good are used as synonyms in different contexts. This underlying supposition, that there *must* be an identity of metaphysical and theological principles (which we have described as an Aristotelian pattern), is not even questioned.

It is within this framework that Bordt raises the question of how Plato's god relates to soul and intellect (νοῦς). He interprets the Athenian's address to the colonists in *Laws* IV as intimating that 'god' is identical with Law and with intellect, and that the moral message given to the colonists, that they should 'become like god', means 'to orient oneself ever more towards the intellect'.⁵⁶ This identification of god with intellect, however, stands in contrast with *Laws* X, where god is identified with soul. Thus, Bordt's interpretation faces a similar problem as Menn's – that identifying god with intellect implies that one downgrade the role attributed to soul. Bordt admits that the soul's role is particularly prominent in *Laws* X (which we shall discuss below). Yet according to Bordt, the inference at *Laws* X, 904a8–10, 'that the combination of body and soul, while not an eternal creation

⁵⁰ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 148.

⁵¹ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, pp. 161–2: 'Wenn die Rede von Gott dann sinnvoll ist, wenn man unter Gott – philosophisch gesprochen – das letzte Prinzip der Wirklichkeit versteht, und die philosophische Untersuchung des letzten Prinzips der Wirklichkeit zu dem Ergebniss kommt, daß das letzte Prinzip der Wirklichkeit das Gute ist, dann kann Gott nicht von dem Guten unterscheiden sein.'

⁵² Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 163.

⁵³ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 163.

⁵⁴ This entails that Bordt explicitly favours the dialogues where Plato's metaphysics and the principles of theology are most prominent: the *Republic* and the *Laws* (Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 167).

⁵⁵ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 149.

⁵⁶ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, pp. 183–4; see above, pp. 19–24.

like the gods sanctioned by law, is nevertheless indestructible',⁵⁷ is to be taken as a confirmation of the soul's dependence upon something higher. If something is destructible, it must 'depend' on something eternal.⁵⁸ Thus – or so Bordt maintains – the soul depends on intellect (or, according to the *Timaeus*, the Demiurge). Moreover, referring to the passage where Plato indicates that the World-soul is good whenever it takes intellect as its guide, but bad whenever it does not ally itself with intellect,⁵⁹ Bordt argues that intellect should be regarded as independent from the World-soul. Thus, whereas intellect is normally (*normalerweise*) the intellect of a soul, it can be shown that the intellect referred to here in conjunction with the World-soul is *not* the intellect of a soul.⁶⁰

This means, then, that a distinction needs to be made between the intellect (*νοῦς*) which is present in souls, and the intellect that causes order in the universe.⁶¹ However useful this distinction may appear, it is out of accord with the general argument of *Laws X*, which posits soul as the cause of order in the universe, and with Plato's repeated statement that intellect is always combined with soul.⁶² It moreover fails to follow from the single passage adduced in evidence, *Laws X*, 897b, where – as we shall argue – the text does not have to mean that an evil World-soul ever exists. Plato merely points out that any soul might use intellect, or leave out intellect, but that the order of the universe does not allow us to infer that the World-soul would be without intellect.⁶³ There is no compelling reason to read this as a confirmation that intellect stands outside of soul.

Bordt is aware of the problem raised by the general context of *Laws X*, and asks the question of how the Athenian can maintain (alongside *Phaedrus* 245c–246c) that the self-moving soul is the ultimate cause of all motion (*Laws X*, 895c–896a).⁶⁴ The answer, Bordt argues, is that the intellect also causes a kind of motion (*eine Art von Bewegung*), albeit different from the motion produced by the soul itself. It is far from clear how this would follow from Plato's text, as Bordt admits, but he finds an interesting clue in Aristotle's way of tackling this precise question at *Metaphysics XII* (which explains how intellect sets the celestial spheres in motion). According to Bordt, the reason why Plato does not provide

⁵⁷ See below, p. 115.

⁵⁸ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 221: 'Etwas, das lediglich unvergänglich ist, hängt ontologisch von etwas ab, das ewig ist.'

⁵⁹ *Laws X*, 897b.

⁶⁰ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 222: 'Der *nous*, den die Seele zur Hilfe nimmt, ist von der Seele selbst unabhängig. Das bedeutet natürlich nicht, daß jeder *nous* von einer Seele unabhängig ist; im Gegenteil ist der *nous* normalerweise der *nous* einer Seele. Der *nous* der Weltseele ist aber nicht identisch mit dem *nous*, den sie zu Hilfe nimmt, und der nicht ein *nous* einer Seele ist.' Bordt thus obviously sides with Menn, against Cherniss (*Aristotle's Criticism of Plato*). See Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, pp. 222–3.

⁶¹ Cf. Hackforth, 'Plato's Theism', p. 445.

⁶² See below, pp. 87–95.

⁶³ See below, pp. 109–10.

⁶⁴ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, pp. 223–4.

an answer lies in his unwillingness to elaborate on a number of philosophical presuppositions that he did not want to thematize in the *Laws*.

Again, it is telling that Aristotle should come to the rescue for this interpretation, with Bordt referring to his hermeneutic presupposition: the Aristotelian conception of a cosmic intellect and its way of causing motion in the celestial spheres. It is true that Plato's account of celestial motion in *Laws X* does remind one of Aristotle's theology, but it is another thing to suppose that Plato's and Aristotle's theology should in any case be complementary.

Bordt's conclusion to this analysis is lucid:

We have seen that Plato in the tenth book of the *Laws* intimates that the World-soul is not the ultimate ontological principle, but that it is dependent on intellect. This ultimately contradicts the thesis that souls may have the status of being the first principle. This situation reflects on our investigation into Plato's theology: as the gods are souls, and souls cannot be ultimate principles, gods cannot be ultimate principles.⁶⁵

Indeed, I would say, gods are not Plato's ultimate principles – though in Bordt's case, this conclusion rests on an erroneous analysis of the role of intellect. As I will argue, the question should thus be, how do the gods *relate* to ultimate principles? That is not Bordt's approach. His presupposition about the relation between theology and metaphysics forces him to proceed by reinterpreting the whole content of the proof for the existence of the gods in *Laws X*. His analysis discredits this proof by saying that Plato himself puts his account in perspective,⁶⁶ and that the Athenian does not really argue against atheism by his introduction of new gods (that is, the souls of the celestial bodies), whereas he should have been arguing for the existence of the gods of the *polis*.⁶⁷ Hence, 'the proof for the existence of the gods does not do what it claims to be doing':⁶⁸ Plato does not actually develop an argument for the existence of the gods.

The fact that Plato's proof for the existence of the gods is based on the acceptance of the gods as souls is thus explained away, in order to safeguard the general lines of the metaphysical interpretation. The general argument in *Laws X*

⁶⁵ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 226: 'Wir haben gesehen, daß Platon im zehnten Buch der *Nomoi* die Auffassung nahelegt, die Weltseele sei nicht das letzte ontologische Prinzip, sondern von der Vernunft abhängig. Damit ist die Auffassung endgültig widerlegt, daß Seelen der Status eines ersten Prinzips zukommen könnte. Dieses Ergebnis hat eine Konsequenz für unsere Frage nach Platons Theologie: Weil die Götter Seelen sind, Seelen aber keine letzten Prinzipien sind, können Götter keine letzten Prinzipien sein.' (author's translation).

⁶⁶ Bordt emphasizes the remarks Plato adds at 885e, 907b10–c1, 907c4.

⁶⁷ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 226–31.

⁶⁸ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 231: 'Der Beweis für die Existenz der Götter leistet folglich nicht das, was er zu leisten vorgibt.' (author's translation).

would thus be very weak, as it would only refer to an astral religion (with gods as souls) that could not convince an atheist. Instead, Plato's 'genuine' account of the gods – says Bordt – is much stronger, and is to be found at *Laws* X, 897b, where intellect is said to be 'a god for the gods'. The Greek text of this passage is not without problems. The Oxford edition has the following:

... νοῦν μὲν προσλαβοῦσα ἀεὶ θεὸν ὁρθῶς θεοῖς ...⁶⁹

... when [the soul] takes on intellect (always truly a divinity for the gods) ..
(author's translation)⁷⁰

Bordt translates as follows:

... [daß die Seele] immer die Vernunft (*nous*) zu Hilfe nimmt, die auch für die Götter der Wahrheit entsprechend ein Gott ist.⁷¹

This passage does indeed indicate that intellect is 'god for the gods'. I take this to mean that intellect is that which makes the gods divine. This does not have to entail that intellect exists *outside* the divine souls, as we shall note when discussing the context of this passage.⁷² Yet Bordt wants the passage to say exactly this – that the gods are only one kind of soul for which the intellect is god, and thus, that intellect precedes them all. In order to defend this conclusion, Bordt follows a strange procedure. He translates the phrase as 'intellect which in accordance with truth is a god *also* for the gods' – while there is no element in the Greek that would justify the addition of '*auch*' in his translation – and then proceeds to stress this '*auch*' as the decisive element:

With the phrase that the νοῦς is 'a god *also* for the gods', Plato obviously means that the νοῦς is a god not exclusively for the gods, but, as we may infer, also for human beings. Humans as well as gods must recognize the νοῦς as a god. [...] Just as the souls of the celestial bodies are gods for the humans, and humans must recognize these gods, in the same way is the νοῦς a god for gods and humans.⁷³

⁶⁹ The text of the OCT edition follows mss A and O here, reading θεὸν ὁρθῶς θεοῖς. A. Diès (in the Budé edition) has θεῖον ὁρθῶς θεοῖς.

⁷⁰ T.J. Saunders' translation is very biased, and misses the obvious connection between νοῦν and θεὸν: 'whether [the soul] cleaves to divine reason (soul itself being, if the truth were told, a divinity) ...'

⁷¹ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 234.

⁷² See below, pp. 97–103.

⁷³ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, pp. 234–5: 'Mit der Formulierung, der *nous* sei '*auch* für die Götter ein Gott', ist offenbar gemeint, daß der *nous* nicht ausschließlich ein Gott für die Götter, sondern, so ist zu folgern, auch für Menschen ein Gott ist. Sowohl die Menschen als auch die Götter müssen den *nous* als einen Gott anerkennen. [...] So wie die Seelen der Himmelskörper für die Menschen Götter sind und die Menschen diese Götter anerkennen

Apart from the fact that this passage does not have to mean that intellect exists separately from soul, Bordt's reading is biased and incorrect. It nevertheless serves to make his point, namely that the intellect is a higher divinity, beyond the gods (who are souls). And thus, concludes Bordt, Plato's views on the gods in the *Republic* as in the *Laws* come down to the same: there is an ultimate god who is to be identified with Plato's ultimate metaphysical principle, and on which the gods are ontologically dependent.⁷⁴

Having thus argued that Plato's ultimate god is intellect, Bordt needs to make a final step by showing how the intellect can be identical with the Form of the Good: how to reconcile the *Laws* and *Timaeus* with the *Republic*. Bordt admits that there are no texts that make this explicit, but he recognizes hints in certain passages,⁷⁵ and again, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* XII (alongside Speusippus) is adduced in evidence. His most important texts, however, are at *Phaedo* 96a–102a, where the intellect is referred to as a cause that produces order and the 'best' constitution. Bordt explains that exactly these characteristics are also ascribed to the causal force of the Form of the Good in the *Republic* (the Good providing order and intelligibility to the world of Forms). From here, Bordt jumps to the conclusion that the Good and intellect (νοῦς) may be identified – turning a blind eye to the fact that the intellect is primordially the cause of order in the sensible universe, whereas the Form of the Good is the cause of being and intelligibility for the Forms. It is, moreover, hardly understandable how the enigmatic and highly transcendent notion of the Good would suddenly be identical to something which Plato describes elsewhere as 'that which looks at the Model' (see *Timaeus* 28a), or that which cognizes the Forms. No doubt Bordt would explain this away by saying that this refers to the human intellect, or the intellect of the gods-souls, and not the separate divine intellect.⁷⁶ But the more this argument is used, the fewer the texts that remain to shore up the hypothesis that there is such a separate divine intellect, let alone that this intellect is to be identified with the Form of the Good.

Finally, Bordt argues that the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* should also be seen as Plato's divine intellect, and thus, that he also represents Plato's Good. Indeed, the Demiurge is often described as providing the good, and as wanting the world to be 'like him' – that is, displaying the goodness he possesses.⁷⁷

müssen, so ist der *nous* für die Götter und die Menschen ein Gott.' (author's translation, Bordt's emphasis).

⁷⁴ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 236.

⁷⁵ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, pp. 238–9 quotes *Philebus* 22c, where reference is made to a divine intellect – but the passage does not prove anything about the possible existence of intellect as a separate metaphysical principle. When he refers to the royal intellect in *Phil.* 28c as confirmation of his interpretation, Bordt forgets to mention that precisely in this context (at *Phil.* 30c) intellect is said to be always linked to soul.

⁷⁶ See, e.g., Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 246.

⁷⁷ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, pp. 247–8.

All of this contributes to the conclusion that Bordt drastically over-interprets a (limited) number of passages, while overlooking or explaining away Platonic texts that cut across his metaphysical presuppositions. And in short, if the intellect can be shown to be responsible for goodness and order in the universe – which is undeniably Plato’s deepest conviction – this still does not mean that intellect is ‘the Good’. Nor does Plato’s presentation of the gods as souls having intellect have to be an indication that an ultimate god needs to be sought in an intellect that should be separate from them.

3.3 *The Demiurgic Intellect (Noûς) in the Timaeus*

Our analysis up till now has shown that Plato sees the gods as souls endowed with intellect, and that the metaphysical interpretation of Plato’s theology – represented here by Stephen Menn and Michael Bordt – would want this intellect, as an ultimate God, to be a supra-psychic, separate metaphysical entity. We have formulated a number of critical remarks against this interpretation, and the time has now come to venture an alternative reading of the relevant texts.

The main text to look at in this context is obviously the *Timaeus*, where Plato gives a consistent, though hotly debated account of how the Demiurge orders the sensible universe and brings forth even the gods. It is tempting, then, to see this Demiurge as a super-god, or *the* Platonic god par excellence. Although a number of *Timaeus*’ statements appear to support this description, I shall argue that a literal rendering of his Demiurge entails a host of difficulties and exceptions to Plato’s ontology, including the ontology he explicitly expounds in the *Timaeus*.

It is clear, for one thing, that the Demiurge is to be identified with intellect. This emerges, for instance, from *Timaeus* 47e–48a, where the previous operations of the Demiurge are summarized as ‘what has been crafted by Intellect (νοῦς)’. This identification of the Demiurge with intellect makes it even more pressing for us to ascertain where the Demiurge is to be located in Plato’s cosmic order. The question of who the Demiurge may be was already raised in antiquity, and the ancients’ opinions were as diverse as those of present-day interpreters.⁷⁸

Francis Cornford sees the Demiurge as mythical,

in that he is not really a creator god, distinct from the universe he is represented as making. He is never spoken of as a possible object of worship; and in the third

⁷⁸ Plotinus, for instance, saw the Demiurge as a metaphor (*Enneads* III.9 [13].1; II.9 [33].1–2 and 6; IV.8 [6].1–2; III.8 [30].7–8): he is not *really* thinking and planning, but represents the eternal activity of the intellect. Plotinus thus reacts against (gnostic) literal readings of the Demiurge. See Jan Opsomer, ‘A Craftsman and His Handmaiden: Demiurgy According to Plotinus’, in Thomas Leinkauf, and Carlos Steel, (eds), *Platon’s Timaios als Grundtext der Kosmologie in Spätantike, Mittelalter und Renaissance*, Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, Series I, 34 (Leuven, 2005), pp. 67–102.

part of the dialogue the distinction between the Demiurge and the celestial gods, whom he makes and charges with the continuation of his work, is obliterated.⁷⁹

Cornford also agrees that it is evident that the Demiurge is intellect. Yet when it comes to explaining where this divine Reason is situated in the cosmos, Cornford takes a minimalistic stance: 'If this Reason is not a creator god, standing apart from his model and materials, where is it to be found? Now this is precisely the question which Plato has refused to answer' – so Cornford adds, wryly, that each commentator who has assayed this impossible task 'has found what he set out to look for'.⁸⁰ This frank scepticism is certainly justified, as Plato indeed gives hardly any clue as to how his demiurgic intellect should be interpreted. Yet Cornford's question is too important to be dismissed altogether, and at the risk of 'finding what we set out to look for', we should carefully analyze the meagre indications that Plato does give us.

3.3.1 *The Ontology of the Timaeus*

First of all, we should look into the general ontological scheme that underlies the cosmology of the *Timaeus*. Plato is very explicit about this scheme, which should mean – given the paucity of further indications on the nature of the Demiurge – that it is to be taken very seriously. The *Timaeus'* ontology consists in a dual scheme of Being versus Becoming, as Timaeus explains at *Tim.* 27d–28b:

As I see it, then, we must begin by making the following distinction: What is *that which always is* and has no becoming, and what is *that which becomes* but never is? The former is grasped by understanding, which involves a reasoned account. It is unchanging. The latter is grasped by opinion, which involves unreasoning sense perception. It comes to be and passes away, but never really is. Now everything that comes to be must of necessity come to be by the agency of some cause, for it is impossible for anything to come to be without a cause. So whenever the craftsman looks at what is always changeless and, using a thing of that kind as his model, reproduces its form and character, then, of necessity, all that he so completes is beautiful. But were he to look at a thing that has come to be and use as his model something that has been begotten, his work will lack beauty. (tr. D.J. Zeyl, emphasis added by the translator)

The *Timaeus* thus dwells on the well-known distinction between Being and Becoming, which are accessed by knowledge of the Ideas and by sense perception respectively. The Demiurge or craftsman will look at Being as his eternal model, in order to produce things of beauty in the cosmos. The possibility that he would look at a thing in the world of Becoming as a model, is refuted in the lines that immediately follow the quoted passage (*Tim.* 28b–29a).

⁷⁹ Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, p. 38.

⁸⁰ Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, p. 38.

Thus, the Demiurge is a figure that establishes a relation between the world of Being and the world of Becoming, by imprinting his Model upon the sensible realm. As this presupposes that there be some kind of pre-existing substrate upon which the mundane order is imprinted, Timaeus will add a third ontological element to this dual scheme, when he comes to recapitulate the doctrine at *Timaeus* 48e–49a:

The new starting point in my account of the universe needs to be more complex than the earlier one. Then we distinguished two kinds, but now we must specify a third, one of a different sort. The earlier two sufficed for our previous account: one was proposed as a model, intelligible and always changeless, a second as an imitation of the model, something that possesses becoming and is visible. We did not distinguish a third kind at the time, because we thought that we could make do with the two of them. Now, however, it appears that our account compels us to attempt to illuminate in words a kind that is difficult and vague. What must we suppose it to do and to be? This above all: it is a *receptacle* of all becoming – its wetnurse, as it were. (tr. D.J. Zeyl, emphasis added by the translator)

The exact nature of Timaeus' receptacle need not bother us at present. What should keep our attention for the moment is the fact that this introduction of a third kind (repeated also at *Tim.* 50c–d) does not change the relation between Being and Becoming. To the contrary, it is affirmed in the present passage that the two kinds 'sufficed for the previous account'. This might come as a surprise, because, in fact, if the scheme is dual, there seems to be *no place* for the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*' ontology.⁸¹ He is said to look at the Model – that is, he stands outside the world of Being – and then he hands over this order to the sensible world – that is, he stands outside the world of Becoming. Where is *he*, then? Those interpreters who take the Demiurge to be a real person, or a god, must explain this away, by saying that the Demiurge belongs either to the world of Being or to that of Becoming after all. Plato's explicit and repeated statement that there are only two realms (or three, including the receptacle) does not allow one to assign to the Demiurge a place of his own. Now in both solutions, the position of the Demiurge becomes exceptional and difficult to understand. If one locates him in the world

⁸¹ Thomas K. Johansen, *Plato's Natural Philosophy. A Study of the Timaeus-Critias* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 80–81, explains this away by saying that 'the passage [i.e. 50c–d] is discussing a state of affairs that obtained before the Demiurge created the cosmos.' This is too easy, as it would at least imply that Timaeus would mention the addition of a separate mode of existence when discussing the Demiurge – especially at *Tim.* 48e–49a, where a third kind is introduced after having described at length how the Demiurge operates. One could again say that Timaeus is talking only about the state of affairs before the Demiurge, but it is very hard to see why Timaeus would do so at this point of the argument, without indicating where the Demiurge is to be located.

of Becoming,⁸² then obviously he cannot be a sensible thing among all others. Rather, he is like a father who produces the sensible things, without himself being part of them. Yet if one takes the other possibility – which has attracted far more adherents – we encounter similar difficulties. The Demiurge would then be an intelligible principle among the Forms, but he would have a specific status, in that he is also watching, or contemplating the Forms. So, as we have argued before,⁸³ the world of Being would be subdivided into different kinds: the Model as such, that is, the Forms, over against a person or a being who thinks and understands the Forms and looks at them as distinct principles. His would indeed be an exceptional position at the level of Being.

In his monograph *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*,⁸⁴ Filip Karfik offers an alternative reading that is, all the same, thoroughly metaphysical. According to Karfik, the Demiurge is to be identified with the Model. Having raised the question of which gods are talked about in the *Timaeus* (esp. *Tim.* 41a, with the address of the Demiurge to the ‘Gods of the gods’, Θεοὶ θεῶν), Karfik indicates that the *Timaeus* contains many different divinities: (1) the Demiurge is called ‘god’ throughout the dialogue, and so is (2) the visible world, which has been created by the Demiurge.⁸⁵ The parts of the world (which reflect the Model) are also divine: such are (3) the gods in heaven (οὐράνιον θεῶν γένος, 39e), which are obviously gods, and the animals of the sky, seas and earth, which have a divine element (i.e. immortal soul) in them. The gods in the visible universe are further subdivided into (4) the fixed stars (40a–b), (5) the planets and the earth (40b–c), and (6) the daemons (41d–42d), while (7) the traditional gods (40d–41a) cannot be overlooked, as they are carefully distinguished from the celestial gods.⁸⁶ By enumerating in this way the gods that are parts of the visible world, Karfik indicates that all of these presuppose an intelligible Model. *Timaeus* does not call these models ‘gods’, but he nevertheless suggests that the situation in the cosmos reflects that of the Model. Hence, Karfik establishes an additional hierarchy of intelligible gods – subdivided into the heavenly beings, the beings in the sky, in the seas and on earth – which corresponds to the division of the intra-cosmic gods.⁸⁷ This highly questionable inference serves Karfik’s purposes, however, in the sense that it allows him to explain how the Model can also be indicated as ‘god’.

Subsequently, Karfik analyzes the address of the Demiurge to the gods: ‘Gods of the gods’ (Θεοὶ θεῶν). Taking ‘θεῶν’ to be a partitive genitive,⁸⁸ it becomes

⁸² Thus, e.g., Brochard, ‘Les mythes dans la philosophie de Platon’, p. 57: ‘le démiurge est conçu, ainsi que l’âme du monde elle-même, comme appartenant au monde du devenir.’

⁸³ See above, pp. 73–5.

⁸⁴ Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, pp. 87–148.

⁸⁵ *Tim.* 34b (twice), 68e, 92c.

⁸⁶ Karfik (*Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, pp. 139–45) rightly points out that Plato never denies the existence of the traditional gods (even though he criticizes the traditional stories).

⁸⁷ See the scheme in Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, p. 102.

⁸⁸ Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, pp. 145–6; 147.

important to distinguish between the gods that are addressed and the gods of which the latter are only a group. The addressees (θεοί) are, says Karfik, the visible gods – the fixed stars, planets and earth, and the cosmos.⁸⁹ The others (referred to by θεῶν) are then identified as the intelligible Being (the Model) and the Demiurge,⁹⁰ thus raising the question of how these sets of gods are related. Starting from an analysis of the characteristics of the divine in the *Timaeus* (gods are thinking, and they care about the corporeal world), Karfik admits that this would entail that the Model cannot be a god (as it is not itself thinking – if it were, the function of the Demiurge would be superfluous). Yet this does not lead Karfik to the conclusion that the Model cannot be among the gods. Rather, it triggers a re-evaluation of the position of the Demiurge. Upon reviewing the different interpretations of the Demiurge,⁹¹ Karfik concludes that only the one that identifies the Demiurge with the Model can hold water. The Model as the intelligible object and the Demiurge as thinking intellect are two aspects of one and the same reality, holding together the intellect (νοῦς) and the intelligible object (νοητόν) as one single god.⁹²

Even though Karfik is cautious, and ultimately does not choose between an entirely metaphorical reading and a literal interpretation of the Demiurge,⁹³ it seems

⁸⁹ Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, pp. 117–18. He adds that the addressees do not include the traditional gods, as these do not fit the description given (they are not created by the Demiurge).

⁹⁰ Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, pp. 119–27.

⁹¹ Karfik (*Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, pp. 127–33) mentions interpretations of the Demiurge as (1) the intellect of the World-soul (Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato*, p. 603–10; Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, p. 39; Willy Theiler, *Zur Geschichte der teleologischen Naturbetrachtung bis auf Aristoteles* (2nd ed., Berlin, 1965), pp. 69–74; A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. II: *Le dieu cosmique* (Paris, 1949), vol. II, pp. 104 and 146–9; one may add Gabriela Carone, *Plato's Cosmology and Its Ethical Dimensions* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 42–52 to this list), (2) a separate intellect between the Model and the World-soul (Brisson, *Le même et l'autre*, pp. 81–4; Giovanni Reale, *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone* (20th ed., Milan, 1997), pp. 583–712; Proclus, *In Tim.* I 310.3–312.26), (3) the Model (Matthias Baltes, 'Ἐγὼνεν' [Platon, *Tim.* 28b7]: Ist die Welt real entstanden oder nicht?', in Keimpe A. Algra, Pieter W. van der Horst and David T. Runia (eds), *Polyhistor: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ancient Philosophy. Presented to Jaap Mansfeld on his Sixtieth Birthday*, Philosophia Antiqua, 72 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 317ff; Jens Halfwassen, 'Der Demiurg: seine Stellung in der Philosophie Platons und seine Deutung im antiken Platonismus', in Ada Neschke-Hentschke (ed.), *Le Timée de Platon: Contributions à l'histoire de sa réception*, Bibliothèque Philosophique de Louvain (Louvain and Paris, 2000), pp. 39–62; Diès 'Le dieu de Platon', pp. 61–7), (4) the Form of the Good (Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen*, vol. II, p. 710 n.5; Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Platon*, p. 582 and 597ff; one may add Loenen, *De nous in het systeem van Plato's filosofie*, pp. 217–37, who sees the Demiurge as the 'personification of the Ineffable principle').

⁹² Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, pp. 129–38.

⁹³ This leaving open of both options (Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, p. 138) comes a bit as a surprise at the end of a thorough attempt to explain the text literally.

that his interpretation rests on a number of metaphysical presuppositions that are difficult to maintain – the assumption of the existence of intelligible gods being the most striking one. Moreover, the identification of the Demiurge with the Model remains very questionable.⁹⁴ Even if one could say that intellect (νοῦς) and the intelligible (νοητόν) are interrelated, in the sense that they both require each other, they cannot be seen as identical, unless as an entirely self-contained act of self-thinking thought (as Aristotle would have it). But if so, it becomes hard to understand how the Demiurge can be doing what he does, that is, creating order in the visible world – one would expect him to be contemplating himself (as intelligible), and not to be involved in the material world at all. And if that were the case, he would lose his status as ‘god’, as he would no longer be caring for the corporeal world. That is to say, if one maintains the notional distinction between intellect and the intelligible, attributing different functions and characters to each of them, as Karfik does after all, one cannot simply identify the Demiurge and the Model.

3.3.2 *The Demiurge as an Exceptional Divinity*

If one takes the Demiurge to be a god, one must acknowledge that he is not only exceptional in terms of his ontological position, but in other respects as well.

Indeed, if we read the *Timaeus* as a literal account (or a metaphysical hypothesis) of how the universe came to be according to Plato, it appears that the task of the Demiurge is in fact limited in time. He operates as the maker and father of the gods and of souls, and from *Tim.* 47e onwards, he hands over this task to the gods. Adherents of a literal reading (or a metaphysical hypothesis) should reflect on the question of what the Demiurge is doing subsequently. Does he go on to provide unity to the gods? Does his task consist in continuing to provide the Good or in creating more souls? All of this seems unnecessary in the drift of the story: the gods are made indissoluble; the Good is already transmitted to the gods and to the souls; the souls’ number is fixed.⁹⁵ There does not seem to be much left for this demiurgic god to do than to ‘rest from all his work which he had made’. This Demiurge does not fulfil any ongoing or permanent ontological role after the creation, and this is particularly so if one reads the creation narrative in the *Timaeus* as a temporal event.⁹⁶ But, also, when one takes the Demiurge as

⁹⁴ Few commentators (as listed above, p. 61, fn. 2) would accept that the Forms are Plato’s gods. They are ‘divine’, but never characterized as ‘gods’.

⁹⁵ See *Rep.* X, 611a4–9; cf. *Phaedo* 72a–d.

⁹⁶ Thus, for instance, Johansen, *Plato's Natural Philosophy*, pp. 87–91, who argues that the Demiurge should be taken literally, as should the creation narrative with its indications of temporal succession of the events. Yet, according to Johansen, this creation is not a unique moment. It happens all the time, wherever there is order: ‘God is involved in the creation *whenever* there is order, just as on my understanding craftsmanship works to create order *whenever* the necessary conditions obtain. Put differently, if God acts *qua* craftsman, we would expect him to be on standby and restore chaos to cosmos whenever the world slips into disorder. [...] The *Timaeus* would, then, be a story not just about what a divine craftsman did once upon a time, but also about what divine craftsmen do at all times.’ (p.

a metaphor, referring to a principle that acts a-temporally, it is strange that the gods would be invested with the task of safeguarding the order of the universe. The generation and corruption in which the cosmic order is permanently renewed and reproduced is the effect of the operation of the World-soul, which seems to no longer need the Demiurge once it starts to operate on its own. And the same holds for the stars, the celestial bodies, the traditional gods, and so forth. Yet again, this would make the Demiurge into an exceptional god whose task expires once the world is made – whereas the celestial and the traditional gods have a continuous task to perform, in safeguarding the territory of the sensible cosmos that was given to them in fief.

Second, it is clear that, if the Demiurge is a god, he must be different from all other gods. He is their ‘father and creator’, and does not seem to partake in their constitution (which he brought forth himself), nor in their tasks. We shall have to come back to this. For the time being, we may simply indicate that in this respect as well, the Demiurge constitutes an exception over against the other gods.

This means that, apart from other minor aspects, there are at least three major points in relation to which the *Timaeus*' Demiurge is an exception: his ontological status, his status as a god over against the other gods, and the limitation of his function as a god. In my view, this is too many exceptions. Strictly in terms of a Kuhnian philosophy of science, this should be seen as a paradigm that runs up against its limits, trying to save its basic terms and definitions even when they can no longer be held. Perhaps, then, it is time to propose a paradigm shift, and to introduce a different understanding of the Demiurge.

3.4 Can Intellect (Νοῦς) Exist Separately from Soul?

The questions raised here in relation to the Demiurge and intellect cannot be detached from another problem that has occupied interpreters of the *Timaeus* and of Plato's theology: can intellect exist separately from soul? We have already raised this question vis-à-vis Menn's and Bordt's metaphysical interpretations, but we now need to tackle it in more detail, as a preliminary step to establishing an alternate reading of the demiurgic intellect.

Plato in fact holds a very straightforward view on the relation between intellect and soul, and he states it in a number of passages: intellect cannot exist, or come

91). This interpretation does not account, however, for the fact that the Demiurge handed over the task of ordering and maintaining order to the gods, while he himself seems to fade to the background. And what does the plural ‘craftsmen’ in Johansen's account refer to? Are there many Demiurges, one for every time when the world slips into disorder? Or is this a reference to the gods? If so, then why did we need the Demiurge in the first place? It would be to create the gods as a stand-in for a divine Craftsman that retires from work once the gods can take over. It would be much simpler to surmise that craftsmanship refers to the work that was of all times done by the gods, in their demiurgic capacities – the Demiurge being a general reference to the gods' (*any* god's) creative activity.

to be, apart from soul. Those who maintain that Plato identifies intellect with god – and thus, that intellect must exist apart from soul – will have to disregard or explain away what is conveyed in these passages.

Specifically, these passages are five in number: *Timaeus* 30b, 37c, 46d; *Sophist* 249a; and *Philebus* 30c.⁹⁷ On the basis of number alone – this point has far more reiterations than many other, less debated points in Plato – one would expect to see a high degree of consensus in secondary literature. Yet the opposite is the case: there is no consensus at all, and as we have seen, the adherents of the metaphysical interpretation (who seem to be in the majority in recent publications) take the less obvious stance, namely that Plato does not want to say that intellect can only exist in a soul.

Let us first survey these passages. The first two may be seen as leaving open the possibility of a separate existence of intellect (even though that would be the less probable reading); the three others, however, show that such a possibility is to be excluded.⁹⁸

3.4.1 *Sophist* 249a

In the *Sophist*, when discussing the position of the ‘lovers of the Forms’ over against sheer materialism, Plato at first introduces the well-known scheme of Being versus Becoming. Through perception, the body is our entryway to Becoming, he says, while the soul sets us in contact with real beings, through reasoning (διὰ λογισμοῦ, *Soph.* 248a). Referring to the distinction elaborated previously (*Soph.* 247d–e) between activity and passivity as constituents of being, the discussants now assert that these lovers of the Forms would attribute activity and passivity to Becoming, whereas these characteristics are not applicable to Being. This is because one could not infer that if knowing the Forms is an activity, then the Forms would themselves be passive in that respect, as if they were dependent on the knower’s activity (248c–e). To the contrary, one must assert that that which really is, is endowed with motion, life, soul and thought:

Stranger: But for heaven’s sake, are we going to be convinced that it’s true that change, life, soul, and intelligence (φρόνησις) are not present in *that which wholly is*, and that it neither lives nor thinks, but stays changeless, solemn, and holy, without any understanding (νοῦν οὐκ ἔχον)?

Theaetetus: If we did, sir, we’d be admitting something frightening.

⁹⁷ Cf. Loenen, *De nous in het systeem van Plato’s filosofie*, pp. 55–60.

⁹⁸ Cherniss (*Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato*, pp. 606–07) holds a similar view, but assesses the texts differently. Of the three texts he mentions in a reaction to Hackforth (*Phil.* 30 c, *Tim.* 30 b and *Soph.* 249 a), he admits that the former two ‘might appear to admit’ the interpretation that there is a separate intellect, whereas the third excludes it.

Str: But are we going to say that it has understanding (νοῦς) but doesn't have life?

Th: Of course not.

Str: But are we saying that it has both those things in it while denying that it has them in its soul?

Th: How else would it have them?

(*Sophist* 248e–249a, tr. N.P. White, his emphasis)

This discussion then leads to a paradox: as we must attribute motion to Being, we seem to have to admit that Being can't be known, for knowledge requires some stability and identity. Hence, we must also ascribe rest to Being (*Soph.* 249b–d). The paradox is then solved by showing that Being is distinct from motion and rest, and thus, that it partakes in neither (250a–d).

This passage has puzzled nearly all commentators, including the present one. How should we understand this relationship between Being, rest and motion? How do we assess the critique against the lovers of the Forms, or interpret the thesis that Being has life, soul, and intelligence?

Answering these questions in detail is outside the scope of this book. I take this passage to mean that the role of motion and rest (initially introduced as 'change, life, soul, and intelligence') is played by the soul – which is not simply identical with Being, but which nonetheless partakes in intelligibility – while adding motion, intellect and life to it. For our purposes, the important point in this passage is that – no matter in which direction one takes the questions raised – the life, soul and intelligence (φρόνησις) attributed to Being are explicitly said to presuppose a soul. That is to say, nothing is capable of living if it does not have a soul, nor can anything think without having a soul.

Loenen,⁹⁹ Brisson¹⁰⁰ and Menn¹⁰¹ point out that this does not *have to* mean that the existence of intellect (νοῦς) is limited to soul. It might still be the case that intellect has an existence outside the soul, and that Plato only wants to indicate with this passage that if anything 'has intellect' (putting the emphasis on νοῦν ἔχειν), it must be soul. *Having* an intellect would then be a qualification that depends on the existence of intellect per se, on the level of Being. Yet again, this does not *have to* be the inference. And according to Harold Cherniss, the argument here is quite general, and Plato could not have constructed it if he had believed that intellect can exist separately.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Loenen, *De nous in het systeem van Plato's filosofie*, p. 56.

¹⁰⁰ Brisson, *Le même et l'autre*, pp. 80–81.

¹⁰¹ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, pp. 21–4.

¹⁰² Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato*, pp. 606–07: 'the argument of *Sophist* 248e–249d is quite general [...]. It is an attempt to prove that the totality of the real includes motion, i.e. that κίνησις (motion) is real; and it reaches this conclusion by proceeding from the assumption that reality includes νοῦς (intellect) through the steps that νοῦς implies

3.4.2 *Timaeus 30b*

The same point could be made about our next passage, *Timaeus* 29e–30a, which tells us that the Demiurge wanted to transmit goodness to the world (which he wished to be as like himself as possible), since it is impossible that one who is supremely good should do anything but what is best. The text continues as follows:

Accordingly, the god reasoned and concluded that in the realm of things naturally visible no unintelligent thing could as a whole be better than anything which does possess intelligence as a whole, and he further concluded that it is impossible for anything to come to possess intellect (νοῦς) apart from soul. Guided by this reasoning, he put intellect (νοῦς) in soul, and soul in body, and so he constructed the universe. He wanted to produce a piece of work that would be as excellent and supreme as its nature would allow. (*Tim.* 30b, tr. D.J. Zeyl, slightly modified; bracketed additions are mine)

This passage intimates that the best possible mode of existence in the sensible world consists in possessing intelligence, and that this is only possible for beings endowed with soul. That is to say, the existence of intellect in the sensible world is strictly limited to things that have a soul.

Again, this might mean that the existence of an intellect outside the sensible world, without any soul, might be warranted.¹⁰³ In this case, that is a possibility, as it is ‘the god’ (the Demiurge) who decides that intellect cannot exist without soul. Yet this reintroduces us to the problem of deciding who the Demiurge is, and whether he is to be taken as a supra-psychic (metaphysical) entity. We have already seen that this entails a number of additional problems and exceptions. It seems safer, then, to refrain from jumping to conclusions, and rather to see whether the existence of a supra-psychic intellect is really necessary on the basis of other texts.

3.4.3 *Philebus 30c*

In the *Philebus*, where the discussion is all about determining the relative importance of pleasure and intellect in the constitution of the good life, Plato introduces a fourfold set of principles of the universe: limit, the unlimited, the mixed and the cause of the mixture (*Phil.* 23c–27b). When it comes to relating this fourfold scheme to the dialogue’s central question, Plato locates pleasure in the category of the unlimited (27c–28a). Intellect is given a far more important place, as ‘all the wise are agreed, in true self-exaltation, that intellect (νοῦς) is our king, both over heaven and earth’ (28c). As the universe is well ordered (this can be seen in the ‘wonderful spectacle presented by the cosmic order of sun, moon and stars, and the revolution of the whole heaven’, 28e), it must be governed by intellect

life, life implies soul, and soul implies motion, an argument which Plato could not have formulated if he had believed that there is *any* real νοῦς which does not imply soul’.

¹⁰³ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, pp. 20–21; Brisson, *Le même et l’autre*, pp. 83–4.

(νοῦς, also called ‘a certain intellect and understanding’, νοῦς καὶ φρόνησις τις, 28e). Moreover, the elements that constitute the universe are present in us, albeit in a small and insignificant portion: the fire in our nature, for instance, is due to the existence of a pure, powerful, beautiful and overwhelming fire in the cosmos (29b–d). Hence, the body that is ours is a dim reflection of the corporeal nature of the universe, and, parallel to that, our soul’s existence is due to the fact that the whole universe itself is ensouled (29c–30a). Now this is only possible because the cause of the universe is an all-encompassing wisdom (πᾶσα καὶ παντοῖα σοφία) that produces the world as a beautiful thing (30b). Hence, wisdom and reason (σοφία καὶ νοῦς) constitute the fourth class – the cause that produces the mixture out of limit and the unlimited (30c). Now Plato immediately adds to this:

There could not be wisdom and reason without a soul. (Σοφία μὴν καὶ νοῦς ἄνευ ψυχῆς οὐκ ἄν ποτε γενοίσθην. *Philebus* 30c, tr. D. Frede)

The passage then continues by giving a description of the ‘royal soul and royal intellect that are present in the nature of Zeus, in virtue of this power displayed by the cause’, just as the other gods have other fine qualities, ‘in conformity with the names by which they like to be addressed’ (30d).

This association of the cause with the royal soul and intellect of Zeus will require a more elaborate explanation later on.¹⁰⁴ Concerning the connection between soul and intellect, it is correct, as Stephen Menn argues, that Plato literally says that wisdom and intellect cannot *come to be* (γενοίσθην) without soul. That is true, plainly and simply. But I fail to see why this should mean that there *is* a supra-psychic demiurgic intellect.¹⁰⁵ What is important here is that the inference that intellect can only exist in soul was by no means elicited by anything in the context. That is to say, if Plato were to believe that intellect exists on its own, as a supra-psychic cause, this passage would have been *the* place, par excellence, to spell this out. We are reading a passage in an austere and elevated tone, referring to the most important things in the constitution of the universe: cosmic wisdom and cosmic intellect. Yet, Plato does not refer to these as existing on their own; instead, he deliberately brings in this statement about intellect being bound to soul. Even though the argument is counterfactual, I take it to be a confirmation of the fact that Plato did not envisage his cosmic cause as operating without a soul.

3.4.4 *Timaeus* 37c

At *Timaeus* 37a–b we read that the soul, which is a mixture of the Same, the Different and Being, comes into contact with things that come to be, and with things that are always changeless. The soul is then able to declare what is different and what is the same. This leads Timaeus to make the following inference:

¹⁰⁴ See below, pp. 109–10.

¹⁰⁵ *Contra* Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, pp. 19–24, and Brisson, *Le même et l’autre*, pp. 82–4.

[W]henever the account concerns anything that is perceptible, the circle of the Different goes straight and proclaims it throughout its whole soul. This is how firm and true opinions and convictions come about. Whenever, on the other hand, the account concerns any object of reasoning, and the circle of the Same runs well and reveals it, the necessary result is intellect (νοῦς) and knowledge. And if anyone should ever call that in which these two arise, not soul but something else, what he says will be anything but true. (*Tim.* 37b–c, tr. D.J. Zeyl slightly modified, the bracketed addition is mine)

The question of what is meant by the circles of the Same and the Different is notoriously difficult. Yet however the Same and the Different may be taken, it is clear from this passage that Plato wants us to know that intellect and knowledge cannot occur outside a soul. Here, there is no reason to believe that Plato is talking about the existence of intellect solely in the world of becoming. Even though he uses a verb that refers to ‘becoming’ (ἐγγίγνεσθον), this should not be read as restricted to the intellect that is related to Becoming, and not to a possible existence of an intellect outside that realm. What Plato says is not that the intellect ‘becomes’ as such, but precisely that one must of necessity call ‘soul’ *those beings* in which intellect and knowledge come to be (ἐν ᾧ τῶν ὄντων ἐγγίγνεσθον, 37c). And, by the way, this passage does not concern perceptible things, but ‘objects of reasoning’, as it is stated at the beginning. So Timaeus is not saying that νοῦς exists outside the soul and becomes present in the world of Becoming through soul. If Plato had considered intellect to be a being (ὄν) in itself, existing on its own apart from the intellect that ‘comes to be’ in the beings (ὄντα) that are souls, he could not have put forward this statement as emphatically as he does here: when the account concerns *any* object of reasoning, the *necessary* result is intellect, which can *only* arise in soul.¹⁰⁶

3.4.5 *Timaeus* 46d

Further on in the *Timaeus*, Plato describes how the gods have taken over the demiurgic task: they now have to make mortal bodies and refine the constitution of the soul which the Demiurge had prepared (42d–e). In this description, a clear distinction is to be made between the design of these gods and the causes they use to realize their plans (the material elements and their properties). When summarizing the latter, he writes the following:

¹⁰⁶ As observed by Loenen (*De nous in het systeem van Plato's filosofie*, pp. 59–60), the polemic tone of the quoted passage (and of the next one, *Tim.* 46d) is directed against two possible groups of adversaries who deny the necessary connection between intellect (νοῦς) and soul, both those (like Democritus, but one could understand this to include Anaxagoras as well) who would hold that intellect is material, and those (like the Megarians) who would hold that there is a transcendent, supra-psychic intellect.

Now all of the above are among the auxiliary causes employed in the service of the god as he does his utmost to bring to completion the character of what is most excellent. But because they make things cold or hot, compact or disperse them, and produce all sorts of similar effects, most people regard them not as auxiliary causes, but as the actual causes of all things. Things like these, however, are totally incapable of possessing any reason (λόγος) or intellect (νοῦς) about anything. We must pronounce the soul to be the only thing there is that properly possesses intellect (νοῦς). The soul is an invisible thing, whereas fire, water, earth and air have all come to be as visible bodies. So anyone who is a lover of intellect (νοῦς) and knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) must of necessity pursue as primary causes those that belong to intelligent nature (ἔμψρων φύσις), and as secondary all those belonging to things that are moved by others and that set still others in motion by necessity. (*Tim.* 46c–d, tr. D.J. Zeyl slightly modified, the bracketed additions are mine)

This text is of great importance for us. Not only does it further specify the polemical vein in which Plato puts forward the link between intellect and soul, but we also find a hint at how the causality in the universe is linked to soul, which is one of the central ideas of *Laws X*. Further still, this passage indicates that the primary causes belong to the nature that has intelligence (ἔμψρων φύσις), – primary causes are not excluded from the soul endowed with reason and intellect. This again is to be understood in close relation to the Athenian’s analysis in *Laws X*.

Each of these points deserves proper attention. First, Plato’s argument is directed against those (‘most people’) who consider the material elements to be the real causes of things, since they constitute all things natural. Yet such people fail to understand that the *order* that underlies the material world cannot be produced by the elements themselves, but must of necessity be brought forward by an intelligent cause, one which is capable of understanding order and transmitting it to the things in nature. The elements, then, are only auxiliary causes, the material needed to achieve this design. Admittedly, this link between intellect and order is not made explicit in this passage, but transmitting order is the missing link between the elements and the soul endowed with intellect, the glue that binds together Plato’s reference to the elements and his introduction of the soul that has intellect.¹⁰⁷ His argument, then, is directed against those who believe that matter is all one needs to explain the existence of the universe, thereby neglecting the role of an ‘intelligent design’, which structures the elements and their combinations. And, as such, the polemic is directed against the same adversaries as those intended in *Laws X* (888e–890a): natural philosophers who, like most Pre-Socratics, only dealt with material principles and causes.

Second, within this passage, there was no specific reason to mention the soul as the seat of intellect. The reasoning runs as follows: god uses auxiliary causes to create the universe. Because of their visibility, these auxiliary causes

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Loenen, *De nous in het systeem van Plato’s filosofie*, p. 59.

are erroneously taken by 'most people' to be the actual causes of things. Yet these auxiliary causes are incapable of possessing reason or intellect. Now, if Plato were to think that intellect is a metaphysical principle of its own, why wouldn't he mention that here? It would have made perfect sense. Instead, he suddenly refers to soul as 'the only thing there is that properly possesses intellect'. Why not infer, then, that Plato needed the introduction of soul before he could properly indicate how the true or primary causes look? That is to say, primary causes are noetic, *but* they can only exist in souls. As we shall see later on, this again comes close to what Plato argues in *Laws X*, namely that the real causality in the universe lies in the (divine) souls, endowed with reason, which structure the world.

Third, the conclusion of this passage would again be surprising to those who see intellect as a separate metaphysical entity. The cause of the universe is not something intelligible, but something that thinks and understands (an 'intelligent nature', ἔμφορον φύσις). It is not even intellect (νοῦς) that is mentioned here, but an entity (or entities) with the power of understanding. That is to say, the primary causes are not supra-psychic, but belong to soul, which has just been pointed out as the sole bearer of intellect and reason. The reference to primary causes is thus a reference to souls. And what is more, this task of being the primary cause is in fact the whole enterprise that has been allotted to the Demiurge, who was mentioned at the beginning of this passage as the god in whose service the auxiliary causes are employed. This means, I take it, that the task of the god and of the primary causes is actually identical. If that is correct, then the Demiurge should be seen as the intellect that is present in the intelligent souls, not as a divinity (unless it were 'that which is the kernel of the gods' being divine'), and not as a metaphysical principle on his own. We shall come back to this last point.

The range and importance of these quotations have been assessed in different ways, yet they all contradict the metaphysical interpretation, and the last two appear in the *Philebus*, where in which Plato speaks most explicitly about the divine, royal intellect, and is nearly contemporary to the theological account of the *Laws*. Moreover, in that later account it is again made clear that soul is the cause of (self-)motion – and thus, the existence of the soul, as prior to the intellect, is again presupposed. So we must take this seriously and accept that, indeed, the existence of a Platonic intellect requires a pre-existent soul. That is to say, Plato's intellect is not simply a self-sufficient metaphysical principle. Of course, the intellect is self-sufficient in the sense that it can grasp the intelligible Forms purely on its own powers. Yet it can only do so within a soul, that is, within a being that exists as an individual, and which is subject to the metaphysical structure of the world, rather than being the source of it. This again adds fuel to the interpretation that Plato's gods are not principles, but rather existing beings who participate in the principles.

Stephen Menn¹⁰⁸ explains these passages by taking them to mean that intellect cannot come to be operative in the sensible world without soul – in which case, Plato would not deny that the intellect can exist separately in the intelligible world. I think Menn is basically right that intellect can only *come to be* in soul, but there is no compelling evidence whatever to argue that this means that Plato upholds a vision of intellect existing *apart* from soul, in a status that would differentiate it from the other Forms. And if Platonic intellect *were* to exist outside soul – for which reading, again, there is no compelling evidence – it could only conceivably be as a Form. This might explain what it is to be thinking, but it would do so without being an instance that thinks itself, or, for that matter, that creates the order in the universe. In order for intellect to be *active* or *efficient* – in contemplation or in demiurgic ordination – it needs soul.

Hence, the gods are souls. But while souls may ‘share in’ intellect, they are not identical with it. The gods, certainly, have an eternal and perfect intellect. Their thinking is always perfect and their ordering operation – their task of caring for the soulless things – is always performed in a perfect way. But they are not *just* intellect. They are souls endowed *with* intellect, and that makes an enormous difference. They are individual beings who transmit the order of the intelligible world to the sensible universe.

3.5 Intellect (Noûς) as a Divine Property of Soul

Having established a twofold sense of intellect (voûς), the cognitive over against the demiurgic, and having argued that both senses presuppose soul, we should now return to the question of Plato’s theology and show how the gods enact cognitive intellect, and demiurgic intellect, in their souls.

3.5.1 Cognitive Intellect (Noûς) as a Divine Property of Soul

Arguing that intellect as cognition is a divine property, belonging to the divine souls, should not be too difficult. In the *Phaedrus*’ myth of the soul examined above,¹⁰⁹ we saw that the gods’ souls have access to the place beyond heaven through their contemplation of true reality. This passage was produced as evidence that the gods are souls that are in no way hindered by body. We should now emphasize that this activity of contemplating the Ideas was said to be performed by the soul’s intellect: true reality is ‘visible only to intellect, the soul’s steersman’ (ψυχῆς κυβερνήτη μόνῳ θεατῇ νόῳ, *Phdr.* 247c–d). That is to say, the intellect is the soul’s capacity to contemplate and understand the Ideas. And from the same

¹⁰⁸ Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 19–24, which considers 3 passages only (*Soph.* 249a, *Tim.* 30b and *Phil.* 30c, mentioning *Tim.* 37c and 46d only in passing at p. 20). Brisson, *Le même et l’autre*, pp. 81–4 also starts from these three passages, and argues that they only concern the intellect of the World-soul, without for that matter excluding the possibility of a separate intellect.

¹⁰⁹ See above, pp. 47–50.

Phaedrus passage, we may conclude that this holds for the gods: Plato's gods have intellect as the leading part of their souls.

This also underlies the analysis in the *Timaeus*, where all sorts of divinities are, in one way or other, endowed with intellectual activity. This is most evident in the case of the Demiurge, whose whole enterprise can be summarized as the operation of intellect: he is reasoning (*Tim.* 30b *et passim*), planning, designing, drawing conclusions (33a), persuading (47e–48a), and so forth. But the cosmos, as a divine being, is also a soul endowed with intellect (30b, 37a–c), as are the fixed stars (40a–b) and daemons (43a–44c).¹¹⁰ It is from these divine beings that reason is communicated down to human souls:

Now we ought to think of the most sovereign part of our soul as god's gift to us, given to be our guiding spirit. This, of course, is the type of soul that, as we maintain, resides in the top part of our bodies. It raises us up away from the earth and toward what is akin to us in heaven, as though we are plants grown not from the earth but from heaven. In saying this, we speak absolutely correctly. For it is from heaven, the place from which our souls were originally born, that the divine part suspends our head, i.e., our root, and so keeps our whole body erect. (*Tim.* 90a, tr. D.J. Zeyl)

What are those divine minds thinking? In his discussion of the activities of the fixed stars, Plato gives a hint about the exact nature of their thinking:

He spread the gods throughout the whole heaven to be a true adornment [*kosmos*] for it, an intricately wrought whole. And he bestowed two movements upon each of them. The first was rotation, an unvarying movement in the same place, by which the god would always think the same thoughts about the same things. The other was revolution, a forward motion under the dominance of the circular carrying movement of the Same and uniform. With respect to the other five motions, the gods are immobile and stationary, in order that each of them may come as close as possible to attaining perfection. (*Tim.* 40a–b, tr. D.J. Zeyl, his bracketed addition)

We may infer from this that these celestial gods are always thinking the same thoughts, rotating around their own axes (a changeless motion) and revolving around the centre of the universe. The other five motions (backwards, left, right, up, down; cf. *Tim.* 43b) do not apply to them, and hence, they have a stability that allows them to eternally fix their attention to the same thoughts. As we shall see in the next section, this intelligizing operation of the gods' intellect makes them communicate order to the cosmos.

This can also be inferred with regard to the traditional gods. From the *Philebus* (30d) we learn that each god has his/her own specific qualities, and the *Phaedrus*

¹¹⁰ Cf. Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, p. 128.

adds that every god has his/her own access to the place beyond heaven, from which place reality is contemplated (*Phdr.* 246e–247e). Thus, the gods are constantly viewing the intelligible world, every divinity from his/her specific perspective, yet always without the defiling presence of corporeal burdens, or of motions that entail change.

3.5.2 The Demiurgic Intellect (Νοῦς) as a Divine Property of Soul: Laws, Book X
 Alongside their noetic activity, the gods display the characteristic feature of taking care of the universe, or at least the part of it that belongs to their territory or jurisdiction. They not only think or contemplate intelligible reality, but they communicate something of its order to the sensible world.

This is the demiurgic activity of the gods, which goes with their being souls endowed with intellect. And, in the *Timaeus*, the gods are explicitly said to take over the task of the Demiurge. Having admonished and given ordinances to the newly created gods, the Demiurge sows them into the earth.

After the sowing, he [the Demiurge] handed over to the young gods the task of weaving mortal bodies. He had them make whatever else remained that the human soul still needed to have, plus whatever goes with those things. He gave them the task of ruling over these mortal living things and of giving them the finest, the best possible guidance they could give, without being responsible for any evils these creatures might bring upon themselves. When he had finished assigning all these tasks, he proceeded to abide at rest in his own customary nature. His children immediately began to attend to and obey their father's assignment. Now that they had received the immortal principle of the mortal living thing, they began to imitate the craftsman who had made them. (*Tim.* 42d–e, tr. D.J. Zeyl)

We shall have to come back to the question of what this tells us about the status of the Demiurge. For the time being, it will be clear from this passage that the gods fully partake in the demiurgic activity, and that their care for the universe and for human life – which was one of the dogmas of *Laws X*, in reply to the atheists' second claim – consists in fulfilling this well-designed demiurgic work of creation.

This idea is also expressed in Plato's reply to the atheists' first claim in *Laws X*, namely that the gods do not exist. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the specific value of this lengthy discussion is that it is here that Plato most explicitly states that the order of the universe is due to the presence of soul in it. In other words, the execution of the task of the demiurgic intellect is the prerogative of soul. This passage should therefore be given due attention in our investigation into the relation between soul and intellect.

Plato's basic argument, here, is that the structure of the universe is not a matter of chance, but rather of design. This means, or so he contends, that 'nature' is not 'chance'. It is the effect of law (νόμος) and art (τέχνη), produced by intellect (νοῦς):

Clin.: If even limited persuasion can be applied in this field, no legislator of even moderate ability should shrink from making the effort. On the contrary, he should use every breath he has, as the saying is, to back up the old doctrine that the gods exist, and to support the other arguments you ran through just now. In particular, he should defend law itself and art as existing by nature or as not being inferior to nature, as right discourse wants them to be produced by intellect (νοῦς). (*Laws X*, 890d, tr. T.J. Saunders, thoroughly modified)¹¹¹

The importance of intellect is indicated here in a brief but still decisive way. Yet this first mention of intellect is now left aside, and the idea is elaborated by introducing an important element: the role of the soul in the order of the universe. Atheists see nature as entirely material, whereby the emergence of soul is posterior to material existence:

Ath.: The upholder of this doctrine runs the risk of conceiving of fire and water, earth and air as the first things in the universe, and of using the name of ‘nature’ as referring to those things, whereas the soul is derived from them at a later stage. And he does not just ‘run the risk’ of doing so, but in his argument he explicitly asserts this. (*Laws X*, 891c, tr. T.J. Saunders, thoroughly modified)

Against this view, Plato ventures to prove the pre-existence of soul over body. This is an essential step in his defence of theism, and this entails – in an implicit

¹¹¹ *Laws X*, 890d: δεῖ μηδ' αὐτὴν κάμνειν τὸν γε ἄξιον καὶ μικροῦ νομοθέτην, ἀλλὰ πᾶσαν, τὸ λεγόμενον, φωνὴν ἰέντα, τῷ παλαιῷ νόμῳ ἐπικούρον γίγνεσθαι λόγῳ ὡς εἰσὶν θεοὶ καὶ ὅσα νυνδὴ διήλθεσ' σὺ, καὶ δὴ καὶ νόμῳ αὐτῷ βοηθησαὶ καὶ τέχνῃ, ὡς ἐστὸν φύσει ἢ φύσεως οὐχ ἦττον, εἴπερ νοῦ γέ ἐστιν γεννήματα κατὰ λόγον ὀρθόν, ὃν σὺ τε λέγειν μοι φαίνη καὶ ἐγὼ σοὶ πιστεύω τὰ νῦν. There is a textual difficulty here, as the use of the adverb ‘ἦττον’ (which is in all manuscripts) cannot easily be explained. Hermann suggested reading ἦττονι, in parallel with φύσει. This also is the reading of T. Saunders, who translates ‘he should defend law himself and art as either part of nature or existing by reason of some no less powerful agency’. Yet the absence of an antecedent noun or pronoun, which this reading presupposes, is not evident. Therefore it would be more elegant to read ἢ φύσεως οὐχ ἦττον’ εἴπερ νοῦ γέ ἐστιν γεννήματα, whereby ἦττονα takes up the dual form, as a neuter plural (to which then the verb ἐστιν congrues). This transition from dual to plural form is not exceptional. See, e.g. *Phdr.* 256c, where the dual form of the verb and the subject alternates, within one and the same phrase, with the plural form: τῶ ἀκολάστῳ αὐτοῖν ὑποζυγίῳ λαβόντε τὰς ψυχὰς ἀφρούρους, συναγαγόντε εἰς ταῦτόν, τὴν ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν μακαριστὴν αἴρεσιν εἰλέσθην τε καὶ διεπραξάσθην· καὶ διαπραξαμένῳ τὸ λοιπὸν ἤδη χρώνται μὲν αὐτῇ, σπανία δέ, ἅτε οὐ πάση δεδογμένα τῇ διανοίᾳ πρᾶττοντες. (‘the pair’s undisciplined horses will catch their souls off guard and together bring them to commit that act which ordinary people would take to be the happiest choice of all; and when they have consummated it once, they go on doing this for the rest of their lives, but sparingly, since they have not approved of what they are doing with their whole minds.’ Tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff).

but nonetheless unavoidable way – that the proof of the existence of the gods depends on the proof of the existence of soul. The intellect will play an important role in this story, but it will enter the stage only in an indirect way, through a discussion of the soul.

In this way, Plato counters the atheists' definition of nature. They accept that nature is the generation process of the first things, obviously referring to the Pre-Socratics' acceptance of an original matter out of which all things come to be; but if *soul* can be shown to be the first thing, then clearly, soul is 'pre-eminently natural' (892c). In other words: a true account of nature attributes to soul the most venerable position among natural things. Hence, Plato sets out to prove the pre-eminence of soul, as a principle of movement in the universe. Ten different modes of movement are discussed: (1) revolution around a central point, (2) locomotion, (3) collision with a stationary thing (leading to disintegration), (4) collision with a moving thing (leading to coalescence), (5) increase in bulk, (6) diminution, (7) destruction or corruption, (8) growth or generation, (9) a motion capable of moving other things, and (10) a motion capable of moving itself and other things (893b–894c).

The tenth kind of motion is clearly the highest one, as it implies self-motion and a transmission of this motion to other things. This is the only conceivable origin of all motion in the universe – and it is the type of motion that characterizes the soul, the principle of life in living things and instigator of self-generating motion (894e–896b).

Hence, the soul must be prior to matter, and that which belongs to the soul must be prior to that which is material:

Ath.: So our statement was correct, authoritative, entirely truthful and utterly complete, when we said that soul is prior to matter, and that matter came later and takes second place. Soul is the leader, and matter its natural follower.

Clin.: That is indeed absolutely true.

Ath.: We have kept in mind, haven't we, our earlier admission that if soul were shown to be older than matter, the things belonging to the soul would also be older than the material things?

Clin.: Certainly.

Ath.: So habits, customs, will, calculation, right opinion, diligence and memory will be produced prior to material length, breadth, depth and strength, as soul is prior to matter.

Clin.: Unavoidably. (*Laws* X, 896b–d, tr. T.J. Saunders, thoroughly modified)

This decisive step is then generalized: soul is the cause of *all* things. This immediately raises the question of whether the soul is also cause of evil. This important question is not elaborated upon here, but only briefly addressed by raising the point that one might have to introduce a twofold existence of the soul:

a good soul as opposed to an evil one (896e).¹¹² Yet the central point of this passage is that *the soul governs the universe*:

The soul, by virtue of its own motions, stirs into movement everything in the heavens and on earth and in the sea. (*Laws X*, 896e, tr. T.J. Saunders)

Of course, the question then becomes, which soul is this? Will it be the 'rational and supremely virtuous kind, or that which has neither advantage?' (897b). The *Laws*' discussants immediately agree that the order we see in the universe forces us to accept that the best and caring soul is the one that sets everything in motion, whereas an evil soul could only produce disorder (897b–d):

Ath.: 'If, my fine fellow', we should say [in reply to the question], 'the whole course and movement of the heavens and all that is in them have a nature similar to the motion and revolution and calculation of intellect (νοῦς), and proceed in a corresponding fashion, then clearly we have to admit that it is the best kind of soul that cares for the entire universe and directs it along the best path'. (*Laws X*, 897c, tr. T.J. Saunders, slightly modified)

In this way, the order of the universe and the structured movement of all that exists become the decisive argument for the gods' existence after all, just as the most simple reply at the beginning of the discussion would have it. Yet the situation has entirely changed by the end of this lengthy discussion on the priority of soul in nature. The heavens and all that is in them are ruled by soul (which is endowed with intellect), and *therefore* they can be seen as a confirmation for the gods' existence.

At first sight, and especially for those who want to argue that Plato's god is intellect (νοῦς), it is surprising that reason or intellect is introduced in this rather casual way, almost as a comment on or qualification of the discussion of soul, and without any straightforward discussion of what intellect would be here, let alone of how soul relates to it. It is assumed, not argued, that the introduction of reason in soul causes a qualitative modification in the soul's operation, and that it orientates the soul towards order and virtue. Moreover, this terribly important function of intellect was not discussed earlier in *Laws X*, and its absence proved no hindrance to an elaborate discussion of the soul's priority to material existence.

All of this, however, is perfectly defensible and not remote at all from Plato's overall assumptions. What is surprising is that this introduction of intellect remains

¹¹² This reference to a possible evil soul has been much debated, from Plutarch onwards. As we cannot enter this discussion here, suffice it to say that I take this reference to be an anticipation of the fuller (yet still by no means complete) discussion of irrational souls in what is to follow, irrational souls being characterized by the absence of reason, not by the presence of any specific nature – meaning that evil souls can only be defined *ex negativo*, by the privation of a positive characteristic (i.e. reason).

secondary to a discussion of the soul and the soul's task as lawgiver or leader in the universe. This again means, I take it, that Platonic intellect is basically linked to soul, and hence, that Plato's argument for the existence of the gods had to be an argument for the role of the (rational) soul. Again, even though it is not spelled out, we must face the conclusion (a) that the gods are souls, and (b) that intellect operates through soul.

Immediately after this introduction of the 'rational' soul, the question is raised how we humans can know the movement of the intellect (νοῦς):

Ath.: 'So what is the nature of rational motion?' Now this, my friends, is a question to which it is difficult to give an answer that will make sense, so you're justified here in calling me in to help with your reply.

Clin.: Good.

Ath.: Still, in answering this question we mustn't assume that mortal eyes will ever be able to look upon reason and get to know it adequately: let's not produce darkness at noon, so to speak, by looking at the sun direct. We can save our sight by looking at an image of the object we're asking about. (*Laws* X, 897 d-e, tr. T.J. Saunders)

The Athenian stranger assumes that it will be impossible to have an immediate grasp of what the motion of the intellect is. Plato uses the same imagery here as in his discussion of the Good in the *Republic* (VI, 508a–509c): our eyes cannot bear to gaze directly at the sun, and we need to accustom them by looking at images or reflections. Thus, the absence of any direct knowledge of the Good is now echoed by the statement that the motion of the intellect is only accessible to our knowledge by looking at an image of it.

What, then, is this image of the motion of the intellect? It is the revolution of the celestial spheres, as a corporeal reflection of the inner motion of the intellect. This movement of the heavens is taken from the list of different movements that was given earlier: the circular motion around a single, axial point (introduced as the first kind of motion). This motion is regular and stable, and thus reflects the motion of the intellect (898a–b). Yet the conclusion of this discussion entails that this motion is again issued by a soul:

Ath.: So now there's no difficulty in saying right out that since we find that the entire cycle of events is to be attributed to soul, the heavens that we see revolving must necessarily be driven round – we have to say – because they are arranged and directed either by the best kind of soul or by the other sort.

Clin.: Well, Sir, judging from what has been said, I think it would be rank blasphemy to deny that their revolution is produced by one or more souls blessed with perfect virtue. (*Laws* X, 898 c, tr. T.J. Saunders)

Thus, the indirect discussion of the motion of the intellect, which is the furthest we get in this passage, comes down to a recognition that the heavenly bodies

are revolving in a regular and stable way by virtue of the presence of a perfect rational soul in them. That is to say, the motion of the intellect can only be grasped by looking at the motion caused by the soul or souls that communicate order to the universe – the steady and regular motion of the celestial bodies. Thus, the contemplation of the regular movements of the skies reveals how the intellect operates. And this operation of intellect is bound to souls. Hence, the conclusion imposes itself that the gods are souls, and that they owe their existence as gods to the possession of intellect.

Let us then turn to the concluding part of the exposé on the existence of the gods in *Laws X*, where this existence is explicitly derived from the presence of soul in the universe. The Athenian stranger further develops his point that all revolutions and orderly motion in the universe are due to the presence of soul. As a general example, applicable to all other heavenly bodies, he focuses on the case of the sun. The visible sun is corporeal, of course, and its soul is not accessible to our senses. Instead we must grasp it through our intellect. If we then try to conceive how the soul drives the sun, there are three possibilities:

Ath.: Either the soul resides within the visible spherical body and carries it wherever it goes, just as our soul takes us around from one place to another; or it acquires its own body of fire or air of some kind (as certain people maintain), and impels the sun by the external contact of body with body; or it is entirely immaterial, but guides the sun along its path by virtue of possessing some other prodigious and wonderful powers. (*Laws X*, 898e–899a, tr. T.J. Saunders)

No choice is made between those possibilities, which indicates that an answer would make no difference for this discussion. What matters is that in all three cases, the soul of the sun reveals itself to be a god:

Ath.: Now, just wait a minute. Whether we find that it is by stationing itself in the sun and driving it like a chariot, or by moving it from outside, or by some other means, that this soul provides us all with light, every single one of us is bound to regard it as a god. (*Laws X*, 899a, tr. T.J. Saunders)

Hence, the god is a soul which sets the celestial body in motion, a motion that is perfectly ordered and regular due to the soul's being rational, since it contains an image of the intellect (νοῦς). This conclusion can then be broadened to all ordered beings in the universe:

Ath.: Now consider all the stars and the moon and the years and the months and all the seasons: what can we do except repeat the same story? A soul or souls – and perfectly virtuous souls at that – have been shown to be the cause of all these things, and whether it is by their living presence in matter that they direct all the heavens, or by some other means, we shall insist that these souls are gods. Can

anybody admit all this and still put up with people who deny that ‘everything is full of gods’?

Clin.: No, Sir, nobody could be so mad. (*Laws X*, 899b–c, tr. T.J. Saunders)

Thus, this entire discussion in *Laws X* was designed to prove that the order of the universe is due to the presence of perfectly virtuous (i.e., rational) souls who in some way or other set bodies in motion.

It has not often been pointed out that this conclusion is actually rather strange: what we have been offered thus far is not so much a proof of the existence of the gods, but rather of an intelligent design that structures the universe. In that line, one might be tempted to expect that the conclusion would have to be that ‘we have proven that there is a god, namely the divine intellect, who rules the universe, and who is omnipresent’.¹¹³ But, instead, the discussants conclude that ‘everything is full of gods’. How so? This can only be explained, it seems to me, if one agrees that what we have discovered along the way is not just a metaphysical principle of intellect (νοῦς) which is then identified with ‘the god’, but rather *a multiplicity of individually existent beings who have intellect*. Hence, here, as often elsewhere, ‘the god’ is taken to mean ‘that which makes a god into a god’, or that which, as the essential character of divinity, is present in every single god. Again, one cannot but register that the gods are explicitly identified as *souls*, albeit perfect souls with a perfect intellect, who transmit order to the corporeal world.

4 Plato’s Gods and Plato’s Metaphysics

The metaphysical interpretation, in its various versions, encounters a number of difficulties, which we have highlighted in the previous sections, but which we can summarize here by referring to what Michael Bordt presents, in the conclusion to his monograph, as ‘unanswered questions’ (*Offene Fragen*).¹¹⁴ In short, Bordt, who holds that Plato’s Idea of the Good is to be identified with a supra-psychic and supra-intelligible intellect, indicates that his interpretation leaves open two major issues.

The first consists of a couple of loose ends: (a) In *Republic VI* and *X*, the Forms are represented as having a *dependent* existence (they owe their Being to the Form of the Good), whereas in the *Timaeus* there is no mention of a dependent existence of the Forms; quite the contrary: the Demiurge is dependent on the Ideas in his creative activity. (b) There is no place for the Demiurge in the ontological

¹¹³ See, e.g., Bordt’s explanation of this text: he concludes that no proof for the existence of the gods is given by referring to them as souls. He claims, based on shallow grounds, that *Laws X* does contain references to a supreme god, who would be a separate intellect beyond the gods who are souls. (Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, pp. 231–6; discussed above, pp.78–80).

¹¹⁴ Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, pp. 248–50.

scheme of the *Timaeus*, a fact that Bordt calls ‘surprising’.¹¹⁵ He then offers a tentative solution to these loose ends: the Demiurge is introduced merely to serve the purposes of the *Timaeus* narrative, whereas the intellect (which is obviously different from the Demiurge) is not dependent on the Forms. The latter can then be included in the sphere of Being after all. That would be compatible – according to Bordt – with the statement at *Tim.* 28c that it is ‘difficult to find the maker and father of the universe, and impossible to declare him to everyone’. This, so he claims, cannot refer to the Demiurge since the latter *is* properly explained. Hence, we might surmise that in the *Timaeus*, as well as the *Laws*, a principle is intimated that lies beyond the Forms, one that does not play any further role in the narrative of the *Timaeus*. It is a principle ‘upon which the Forms are dependent, and that can be identified with the intellect’.¹¹⁶ Thus, Bordt ultimately contradicts one of the few statements about which some kind of consensus was reached: that the Demiurge is intellect.

The second open question, according to Bordt, is the apparent difficulty of reconciling two conflicting qualifications of Plato’s highest god. As the Form of the Good, this god is the object of knowledge (*Objekt der Erkenntnis*), whereas νοῦς (intellect) refers to it as ‘knower’ (*der nous, der erkennt*). Bordt admits that the dialogues do not provide any clue to resolve this tension, but he finds a possible solution by referring to Aristotle’s conception of god as self-thinking intellect (*Metaph.* XII 9–10), adding that Plato thus raised the problem tackled by Aristotle’s theology.¹¹⁷

This set of open questions is no small matter. In fact, it lays bare the Achilles heel of any metaphysical interpretation. We have already encountered a number of these problems when discussing Menn’s, Karfik’s and Bordt’s interpretations of Plato’s theology: the absence of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*’ twofold (or threefold) ontology, the difference between the Demiurge as intelligent and the Model as intelligible object, the contradiction between the Form of the Good as beyond Being and the intellect as belonging to Being, and the compression of the Form of the Good (as an intelligible object) with intellect (as contemplating or thinking).

This metaphysical interpretation of Plato’s theology is obliged, at one time or other, to make the texts say things that are not actually there: that the *Timaeus*

¹¹⁵ ‘An dieser Aufzählung muß überraschen, daß der Demiurg, von dem im ersten Teil extensiv der Rede war, gar nicht mehr erwähnt wird.’ (Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 249).

¹¹⁶ ‘Von daher ist es vielleicht möglich, den Konflikt zwischen der Darstellung des Verhältnisses zwischen der Idee des Guten und den anderen Ideen in der *Politeia* einerseits und dem *nous* und den Ideen im *Timaios* andererseits dahingehend zu lösen, daß auch Platons *Timaios* für die Auffassung offen ist, daß es ein Prinzip jenseits der Ideen gibt, von dem die Ideen abhängig sind und das mit der Vernunft zu identifizieren ist.’ (Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, pp. 249–50).

¹¹⁷ ‘Es ist deutlich, daß die Fragestellung, wie sich der *Nous* und sein Objekt verhalten und wie eine Identität zwischen beiden verstanden werden kann, in Platons Dialogen bereits angelegt ist.’ (Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, p. 250).

may be referring to a transcendent divinity that is not discussed any further in the dialogue, or that the tension between the Idea of the Good as known and the intellect as knower requires Aristotelian schemes to be resolved. It is particularly significant that Bordt introduces Aristotle's theology as a complement to Plato's analyses. This gesture, it seems to me, reveals what is really at stake: the metaphysical interpretation starts from unquestioned Aristotelian principles, according to which the order of metaphysics is the order of theology. Accordingly, Plato's theology needs to be brought in line with his metaphysics while, moreover, the intellect is supposed to play the role of supreme metaphysical principle, just as it does in Aristotle.

Yet from the preceding sections, and from the 'open questions' of the metaphysical interpretation, it should be clear – to say the least – that Plato's theology does not readily lend itself to this metaphysical reading. Why not venture, then, to set aside the Aristotelian patterns and read Plato's theology from within Plato – or as Porphyry would say, 'To explain Homer on the basis of Homer' (Ὅμηρον ἐξ Ὀμήρου σαφηνίζειν)? Such a shift would of course not imply that Aristotle's theology has nothing to do with Plato's – for indeed, Aristotle's may well be a reaction to, or systematization of, elements in his master's works. Settling the question of the relation between Plato and Aristotle, however, requires that we do justice to both authors – starting with Plato. And to this end, I should like to present an alternative reading (or, as indicated earlier, another paradigm), one which does not take for granted the idea that Plato's metaphysics and theology should be identified. This interpretation will obviously not resolve all difficulties, but it will – I hope – provide a balanced reading of Plato's account of the gods alongside his metaphysics. And needless to say, we shall rely on a number of observations made in the previous sections and chapters.

4.1 *The Good, the Forms, and Intellect (Νοῦς)*

Plato's metaphysics is, of course, highly debated. But it is safe to say that in the dialogues of the middle period, he elaborated a metaphysical system based on the theory of the Forms, which was to explain the permanent, universal, stable and intelligible nature of things over against the ever-changing and unstable nature of sensible things. Thus, Plato unveiled metaphysical principles, knowable only by reason, which constitute true reality and are participated in by sensible things. When it comes to explaining how those metaphysical principles can posit themselves as intelligible beings, Plato intimates that they owe this to an even higher principle, the Idea of the Good, which provides being and intelligibility to the Forms, just as the sun provides existence and visibility to the sensible world (*Rep.* VI, 508a–509c). The interpretation of this final principle is notoriously difficult – and this starts, by the way, with Glaucon in the *Republic*, who lamely

tries to make a joke out of it.¹¹⁸ But, in the end, with this Good we are talking about just a few lines of text in the Platonic corpus, lines in which Plato seems to refrain from a too-direct description of his ultimate principle – so it may suffice to note that the Idea of the Good is transcendent, not just to the sensible world but also to the intelligible realm, and, more importantly, that the Good transmits its characteristic to all beings.¹¹⁹ All Forms are ‘good’, as are all true beings. Thus, we can say that Plato’s metaphysics consists of a set of principles (the Good and the Forms) that constitute true being, over against the mutability of the sensible world.

This metaphysical scheme also underlies the discussions of the *Timaeus*, where the distinction between Being and Becoming is clearly prominent, as we have seen. It is, furthermore, not too far-fetched to say that the *Timaeus*’ Model is the realm of the Forms.¹²⁰

The question then, of course, is how the intellect (also represented by the *Timaeus*’ Demiurge) relates to these metaphysical entities. I have argued before that intellect operates as the knowing and creative activity of souls. Hence, the intellect should not be taken to be a separate metaphysical principle itself. When one goes along with this, then a number of problems immediately vanish: as we no longer need to ‘locate’ this intellect among the separate principles, so questions of how it relates to the Forms or how it could be identical with the Form of the Good become extraneous.

This also has important consequences for identifying the nature of Plato’s gods. As we have seen, the demiurgic intellect is the main element that determines the gods’ existence; but such a divine intellect is not ‘the’ intellect, since the activity of intellect does not exist apart from soul. Accordingly, Plato’s gods are individual beings, not metaphysical principles. The thesis that Plato’s god is intellect (νοῦς) cannot be accepted, then, as referring to a separate principle of intellect. The demiurgic intellect of the gods is the intellect that every single god has, as a transmitter of order in the universe, by bestowing the Good and the Forms (the Model) upon the sensible realm.

We should immediately recall that Plato’s intellect, as a mediator between the intelligible and the sensible, produces order, as a creative act, but that it is also the act of thinking and the basis of the souls’ goodness or moral excellence. In the case of the gods, this intellect is unaffected by their (possible) bodily existence, and

¹¹⁸ *Rep.* VI, 509c: ‘And Glaucon comically said: By Apollo, what a daemonic superiority!’ (Καὶ ὁ Γλαύκων μάλα γελοίως, ἄπολλον, ἔφη, δαιμονίας ὑπερβολῆς !, tr. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve)

¹¹⁹ The passage from the *Republic* is not the only place where Plato refers to the Good as inaccessible: in the *Philebus* he indicates that the Good cannot be captured in one form, but that it reveals itself through three instances at its threshold (ἐπὶ τοῖς τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ προθύροις, *Phil.* 64 c): beauty, proportion and truth (*Phil.* 64a–66a). This allows Plato to say, for instance, that ‘the force of Good has taken refuge in an alliance with the nature of the beautiful.’ (64e).

¹²⁰ See, e.g., *Tim.* 51b–e.

hence, maintains its property of pure thinking, transmitting order and structure, and perfect virtue. In the case of human beings, however, the intellect obtains a lowered status, as human souls always bear the mark of corporeal existence. Humans are not capable of constructing the order of the universe, nor of perfect understanding or perfect virtue.¹²¹ Instead of creating the universe, their thought and creativity reconstructs the order of the universe.

But if Platonic intellect can thus be operative only when it is contained in soul, then what of the Demiurge, who is identified with intellect – and who is said to operate apart from soul, and apart from the gods? Isn't he Plato's supreme god? One cannot maintain that he is, given Plato's doctrine of intellect. He should rather be taken as the personification of the function of intellect present in the souls that govern the world of Becoming.¹²² The Demiurge is a kind of *prosopopoeia*¹²³ of the activity or (enacted) virtue of thinking and creating that all divine and human souls have (in different degrees). In other words, this virtue is a shared commonality that is grounded in a Form, but which is not described as a Form; it is rather depicted as the shared commonality of the active performance of thinking.

In the *Timaeus*, this common intellect is represented as a god. Yet, as will be clear by now, this Platonic 'god' is a very peculiar one, whom we find nowhere outside the *Timaeus*, and whose presence within the *Timaeus* is apparently different from the existence of all other gods. He has no soul; he is not made as a mixture, like the other gods (*Tim.* 34c–36d), and so on. All of this amounts to saying that in the *Timaeus*, the intellect (the Demiurge) is not treated as a particular god, but rather as 'intellect (νοῦς) in general', bringing all the operations of Platonic intellect under a single heading. And it is in this sense that intellect is also generative of the gods, for Plato's gods belong to the ordered cosmos.¹²⁴ The divine intellect constitutes itself by bringing order *in the souls* in which it is present, and the souls of the gods are those that display this order – demiurgic intellect, and cognitive intellect – in a perfect and permanent way.

Thus, when the operation of the Demiurge is recapitulated (*Tim.* 68e–69c), Plato's account suggests that the intellect of this Demiurge is not distinct from

¹²¹ See, e.g., *Phdr.* 246a–b, 247a–c, 248a–250c; *Tim.* 51e.

¹²² Cf. Harold Cherniss, *Selected Papers* (Leiden, 1977), p. 458.

¹²³ In that ability, the Demiurge is obviously unique in Plato's work, but the *Timaeus* is not the only place where intellect is personified. In the *Philebus*, the intellect (also bearing other names, see above, p. 69) is said to be 'wise enough not to compete for the first prize in the fight for primacy in the good life' (23a), and it is personified when, at the end of the dialogue, the intellectual activities (taken up as the intellect, which 'speaks reasonably and in accordance with her own standards', at 64a) get a say about which pleasures are allowed into the mixture of the good life (*Phil.* 63a–64a).

¹²⁴ In the *Timaeus*, the Demiurge is said to create the gods (the so-called 'young gods', *Tim.* 42d–e), and to be the 'father of the gods' (42e). That this qualification is not to be given too much weight, however, is shown by *Tim.* 50d, where the Model (i.e., the Forms) is also called 'the Father'. This kind of description is part and parcel of the mythical figure of speech.

the intellect of particular gods. Of the three figures at stake in this passage – the Demiurge, the World-god (or World-soul), and Necessity – only two are mentioned afterwards: the divine and necessity, meaning that the Demiurge and the World-soul are later compressed into this category of the divine. That is not to say that the Demiurge is to be identified exclusively with the intellect of the World-soul, as some commentators would have it.¹²⁵ Rather, it means that the Platonic World-soul is the first and most important soul to display the capacity of demiurgic intellect: the first, but by no means the *only* soul, whose activity of thinking and ordering reality is epitomized in the name of ‘Demiurge’.

What to make, then, of the Demiurge’s address to the gods (*Tim.* 41 a), introduced by the famous phrase, ‘Gods of the gods’ (Θεοὶ θεῶν)? I believe the phrase should not be over-interpreted. The genitive ‘θεῶν’ is not necessarily partitive¹²⁶ – hence, there is no need to establish complex divine hierarchies. It would be easy to see it as an intensification of ‘θεοί’, like the phrase ‘King of kings’. Though many examples of such intensification are biblical Hebraisms, the use of the genitive in this sense is certainly not limited to Judaic or Near Eastern sources: one also finds it in the tragic poets.¹²⁷ But if this solution appears too easy, one might also consider taking ‘θεοὶ θεῶν’ as addressing that element which constitutes the divinity of the gods. This would be in perfect parallel with ‘a god for the gods’ (θεὸς θεοῦς) at *Laws* X, 897b, where intellect is indicated as that which is divine for the gods.¹²⁸ Likewise in the *Timaeus*, one could infer that the Demiurge is addressing the intellect of the gods, as that which makes them divine. The Demiurge (i.e., intellect) who in the narrative addresses the gods’ intellect would then be a reference to the divine souls’ rational reflection on their own tasks, which *Timaeus* presents in a mythical account.

In my view, all of this means that we should not over-interpret the *Timaeus*’ description of the Demiurge as a ‘god’, although of course the textual evidence is there. Plato repeatedly states that the theory expounded here is a ‘likely myth’ (εἰκῶς μῦθος, 29d, 59c, 68d, 69b), on account of the subject matter itself being a likeness, and on account of the deficiency of our human knowledge (29b–d, discussed above, p. 32). That it is a Platonic ‘myth’ does not mean that there is no truth in it.¹²⁹ But it does allow us to infer that the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* is indeed a metaphorical description of the role of Platonic intellect in the universe,

¹²⁵ See the list of adherents of this identification as provided by Karfik, *Die Beseelung des Kosmos*, pp. 127–33, quoted above, p. 85, fn. 91.

¹²⁶ *Contra* Karfik, quoted above, pp. 84–6.

¹²⁷ Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 65: ἔσχατ’ ἐσχάτων κακά (‘the worst of the worst of evils’), *Oed. Rex* 465: ἄρητ’ ἀρρήτων (‘the unspeakable of the unspeakable’), *Oed. Colon.* 1238: κακά κακῶν (‘the evils of evils’); Euripides, *Andr.* 520: ἐχθροὺς ἐχθρῶν (‘the most inimical of the enemies’). See Eduard Schwyzer, *Griechische Grammatik: Auf der Grundlage von Karl Brugmanns Griechischer Grammatik*, 2 vols (Munich, 1966), vol. II, p. 116.

¹²⁸ For an analysis of this passage: see above, pp. 78–80.

¹²⁹ See, e.g., *Tim.* 22c–d, about the myth of Phaethon.

a personification of this intellect (which is indeed a divine characteristic) that does not, however, introduce a new cosmological god, let alone a new religion.

Exceptional though this introduction of the Demiurge may be, the overall cosmology of the *Timaeus* does display the attention Plato is paying in most of his later dialogues to the world of Becoming, and to the question of how to account for its ordered structure. In that sense, the *Timaeus* is closely akin to other late dialogues like the *Philebus*¹³⁰ and *Laws*.

Outside the *Timaeus*, the operations of ordering and structuring the universe are consistently ascribed to (the souls of) Plato's gods. In the *Philebus*, the 'kingly soul and intellect' is ascribed to Zeus, who acts as the cause and ruler of the universe (*Phil.* 30d).¹³¹ In the *Phaedrus* we read a similar account:

Now Zeus, the great commander in heaven, drives his winged chariot first in the procession, looking after everything and putting all things in order. (*Phdr.* 246e, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff)

This raises the question, then, whether Zeus is the soul of the entire universe – the *Timaeus*' World-soul. This indeed seems to be the implication in Plato's later works, at least, though he gives us no explicit hints to help settle the question. Yet, in any case, outside the *Timaeus* the demiurgic functions are made concrete – they are seen as single decisions made by a rational soul (or by rational souls, as the other gods also have a share in intellect) that fulfils his proper (and individualized) task of caring for the lower and the soulless reality.

Therefore, in the narrative of the *Timaeus*, the Demiurge cannot easily be identified with Plato's Zeus, as Zeus himself is only one of the gods whom the Demiurge has produced. Nor can the Demiurge easily be seen as the intellect of the World-soul, as *Timaeus* tells us that the World-soul is also produced by the Demiurge. But maybe this 'producing' in the *Timaeus* might be taken as a mythical expression to say that the younger gods can only be 'gods' thanks to the presence of their divine intellect, just like the World-soul can only be what it is owing to the demiurgic intellect that resides in it. For after all, in the *Philebus* the ordering intellect, the World-soul and Zeus are connected, and so they should be, as that which characterizes Plato's intellect in general will be *a fortiori*, and in the first instance, a characterization of his most encompassing god (Zeus) and of the most encompassing soul (the World-soul). Thus, eventually, we are siding again with Francis Cornford, who suggests that the Demiurge is Reason that resides in the World-soul¹³² (to which it should be added that this reason is not linked

¹³⁰ Cf. Dorothea Frede, *Plato: Philebus* (Indianapolis, 1993), p. LXIX; W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. V: *The Later Plato and the Academy* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 201.

¹³¹ On that account, the Neoplatonists saw Zeus in this creative and ruling function, as identical with the Demiurge: see Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* V, 12–32.

¹³² Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, p. 39.

to the World-soul alone, as it characterizes any god; still, it remains true that the World-soul is the first and most important bearer of this intellect). Hence, the first occurrence of the demiurgic intellect is the royal intellect of Zeus, whose soul, according to the *Philebus*, may be seen as the World-soul. For Zeus will be the first and highest soul to participate in the virtue of 'νοῦς', and his radius of influence, so to speak, within the Platonic universe, will – of all the souls – be the most encompassing. That is how Plato re-integrates the traditional view of Zeus as 'the Father of gods and of mortal beings'.¹³³ This does not mean, however, that Plato's Zeus is omnipotent or that his territory is unlimited. The World-soul has a specific task, which is bounded by the jurisdictions of Plato's other gods.¹³⁴

4.2 The Gods and Their Metaphysical Fate

On the basis of these analyses, we may now conclude that intellect (νοῦς) in all of its operations is bound to look at the Model (the intelligible world), and to instantiate the good – either as transmitting the order of the good, or as enacting the good in virtuous deeds. This means, then, that the intellect of Plato's gods will *have to be* good. There is thus an unmistakable relation between the gods and metaphysics: the gods must be good and honest (as we have also seen in the 'patterns for theology'), and they cannot but transmit the good to the area they patronize.

One cannot but conclude that, when viewed from this angle, the gods are not Plato's 'highest beings': they are themselves subordinated to the Good and the Forms. One can easily see how this leads to the conclusion that – as required in the metaphysical interpretation – if the gods are subordinated to the Good and the Forms, then these metaphysical principles ought to be 'more divine' than the gods. The gods then become lower creatures, which must be surpassed by higher metaphysical principles – principles which must be gods, above the gods.

Yet this does not have to be our conclusion. In traditional Greek religion, the gods were not seen as omnipotent. They were the highest among mortals and immortals, but they had to obey a higher force, the force that binds *every* being to its own task and position. It is the all-pervading force of fate, μοῖρα or εἰμαρμένη, which, though itself not a god, represents a divine power that rules the universe.¹³⁵

¹³³ Cf. above, pp. 55–6.

¹³⁴ cf. *Phil.* 30d: 'You will therefore say that in the nature of Zeus there is the soul of a king, as well as a king's intellect (νοῦς), in virtue of this power displayed by the cause, while paying tribute for other fine qualities in the other divinities, in conformity with the names by which they like to be addressed'; *Phdr.* 247a: 'each god in command of the unit to which he is assigned'.

¹³⁵ Cf. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 129. Also in the Derveni papyrus, μοῖρα is said to have been present at the birth of Zeus; see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 320.

It would certainly be recognizable to his fellow Athenians if Plato were to suppose that his metaphysical principles have a power similar to the traditional conception of fate. Yet he would not be Plato if he did not imbue this power with the requirements of moral goodness and order. In the traditional views, fate was responsible for any event, whether it be good or evil. In Plato's hands, this all-pervading force is reinterpreted as imposing the good, intelligibility and order upon the universe, thus explaining how the world order has issued from a consistent principle. That is the way in which metaphysics and theology meet in Plato: the metaphysical order is the inescapable framework within which the gods have to operate. Yet without the operation of the gods, whose activity constitutes the presence of the demiurgic intellect, no transmission of the metaphysical structure to the sensible realm can take place – and, hence, 'everything is full of gods' (*Laws* X, 899b).

4.2.1 Plato on Fate (Εἰμαρμένη)

That Plato's metaphysical structures indeed play the role of fate can be inferred from his use of the word εἰμαρμένη ('fate'). The term (including its derived adjective εἰμαρμένος) occurs 17 times in Plato's works,¹³⁶ most often in a mythical context,¹³⁷ sometimes referring to the allotted date of our death, which no one can know nor alter.¹³⁸ Interestingly enough, in one of the latter instances, Socrates inserts the qualification of 'my fated day, as a tragic character might say' (*Phaedo* 115a), thus clearly relating fate (εἰμαρμένη) to its tragic and mythical roots.

However, four occurrences of εἰμαρμένη ('fate') require particular attention. They are all situated in the context of the cosmological explanations of the *Timaeus* and *Laws* X. From these instances, it appears that Plato did relate fate (εἰμαρμένη) to his cosmological principles of order and the Good. We shall discuss the first three here, and leave the fourth, in *Laws* X, for an extensive analysis in the next section.

At *Timaeus* 41d–e, when the Demiurge has finished his speech to the gods, he starts to make the souls of the other creatures. He is described as doing the following:

He mounted each soul in a carriage, as it were, and showed it the nature of the universe. He described to them the laws that had been foreordained (νόμους τε τοὺς εἰμαρμένους εἶπεν αὐταῖς): They would all be assigned one and the same initial birth, so that none would be less well treated by him than any other. Then he would sow each of the souls into that instrument of time suitable to it, where

¹³⁶ As counted on the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>.

¹³⁷ *Phaedo* 113a; *Politicus* 272e; *Protagoras* 320d, 321c; *Rep.* X, 619c; also *Menex.* 236d (where the term is used in a quasi-mythical reference to the fate of the dead), and *Theaet.* 169c (where the term is used ironically) may be added to this list, as well as *Menex.* 243e and *Laws* XI, 918e (where εἰμαρμένη is referred to *ex negativo*: 'as if supposedly, it were fated that ...').

¹³⁸ *Phaedo* 115a; *Gorgias* 512e; *Laws* IX, 873c.

they were to acquire the nature of being the most god-fearing of living things ...
(*Tim.* 41e, tr. D.J. Zeyl, author's bracketed addition)

This means that the laws of fate are here taken up within the project of bringing order to the universe. It is not said that the Demiurge is the author of those laws, but that he communicates them to the souls – which could indeed be expected to be the case, as the demiurgic intellect is the transmitter of Plato's metaphysical order.

The same can be inferred from *Tim.* 89b–c, where Plato describes the occurrence of disease, which befits the design of life:

Every disease has a certain makeup that in a way resembles the natural makeup of living things. In fact, the constitution of such beings goes through an ordered series of stages throughout their life. This is true of the species as a whole, and also of its individual members, each of which is born with its allotted span of life (καὶ καθ' αὐτὸ τὸ ζῶον εἰμαρμένον ἕκαστον ἔχον τὸν βίον φύεται), barring unavoidable accidents. This is because its triangles are so made up, right from the beginning, as to have the capacity to hold up for a limited time beyond which life cannot be prolonged any further. (*Tim.* 89b–c, tr. D.J. Zeyl, author's bracketed addition)

In this passage, Plato recycles the tragic notion of the allotted lifetime within the account of a well-ordered constitution of the sensible universe out of basic triangular structures. Our allotted lifespan is not due to traditional 'fate', but to the possibilities and restrictions imposed by the structures which constitute the universe. The fact that Plato uses the term εἰμαρμένη ('fate') here nevertheless shows that he re-interprets it as part of the order that governs the universe. Moreover, the context reveals that this order is *good*, as disease (and the end of life) is explained as part of the design, not as an unfathomably ordained fate – even though, as Plato admitted, unavoidable accidents do happen (intimating that these are also not to be ascribed to any arbitrary force, even if they don't seem to befit the order of the universe). Curing diseases with drugs, then, does not do much good, as it does not allow the organism to cope with the sickness for as long as it takes:

Now diseases have a similar makeup, so that when you try to wipe them out with drugs before they have run their due course (ἦν ὅταν τις παρὰ τὴν εἰμαρμένην τοῦ χρόνου φθεῖρη φαρμακείαις), the mild diseases are liable to get severe, and the occasional ones frequent. (*Tim.* 89c, tr. D.J. Zeyl, author's bracketed addition)

We can deduce from all of these passages that Plato did refer to the cosmic order as 'fate' (εἰμαρμένη), as something imposed on the souls and on the sensible world, which may not be altered, but which – contrary to the traditional belief – produces *good* or *well-ordered* effects. That is to say, Plato's conception of

εἰμαρμένη (outside the more traditional references, in mythical contexts) allows for a reference to the metaphysical principles of goodness and order that govern the universe.¹³⁹

4.2.2 Fate and the Checkers-Player

The final occurrence of the word εἰμαρμένη, in the *Laws* Book X (904c), is by far the most interesting, and it is worth studying the whole context in which it occurs. As we have seen before, Plato tackles the second argument against the atheists, namely that the gods do care about the human race, by arguing that god cannot be less skilled than a mortal craftsman. The universe is said to be organized and fostered by an unidentified force (ὁ τοῦ παντὸς ἐπιμελούμενος)¹⁴⁰ which imposes order upon the universe, and preserves and governs it, down to its smallest constituents (*Laws* X, 902e–903b). This language comes very close to the *Timaeus* narrative, and this is particularly the case with the *Laws*' reference to craftsmen and the divine as a craftsman.

From what Plato adds to this, we can gather that the order the divine craftsman imposes on the universe is actually received by *souls*:

But you're grumbling because you don't appreciate that your position is best not only for the universe but for you too, thanks to your common origin. And since a soul is allied with different bodies at different times, and perpetually undergoes all sorts of changes, either self-imposed or produced by some other soul, the checkers-player has nothing else to do except promote a soul with a promising character to a better situation, and relegate one that is deteriorating to an inferior, as is appropriate in each case, so that they all meet the fate they deserve (ἴνα τῆς

¹³⁹ This conclusion is also supported by Plato's usage of the word Μοῖρα. The notion of θεία μοῖρα, a divine allotment – divine being seen as partaking in the right order of the world, and in goodness (thus, e.g., *Apol.* 33c; *Phd.* 58e; *Phdr.* 230a, 244c; *Io* 534c, 535a, 536c–d, 542a; *Rep.* VI, 493a; *Laws* I, 642c, IX, 875c). Μοῖρα often refers to the appropriate destiny after death, corresponding to the moral progress (or lack of it) one has made: see *Phd.* 113e; *Phdr.* 248e; *Menex.* 247c; *Rep.* VI, 498c; *Laws* IX, 870e; XI, 931e, XII, 959c. See also *Laws* X, 903e, quoted below, where μοῖρα refers to the reward or punishment the soul may receive when it acts or fails to act in accordance with the excellence required by the position allotted to it. At *Symp.* 206d, Beauty is said to stand by the cradle as the Μοῖρα, when the soul is giving birth. From the myth of Er (*Rep.* X, 613e–621b) we learn that in Plato's version, the Fates (Μοῖραι: Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos) are to be connected to the world order in which goodness is rewarded, and evil is punished after death.

¹⁴⁰ *Laws* X, 903b, quoted above, p. 44. This force who supervises the universe is mentioned in the dative, τῷ τοῦ παντὸς ἐπιμελουμένῳ (and taken up again in the dative at 904a), and thus it could equally be neutral, yet it is referred to again, later on, as the 'checkers-player' (ὁ πεπτεντής, 903d) and as 'our king' (ἡμῶν ὁ βασιλεύς, 904a). We may thus surmise that the cosmic force is personified, even though it is not specified any further. The checkers-player is not even called 'divine' (contrary to Saunders translation).

προσηκούσης μοίρας λαγχάνη). (*Laws* X, 903d–e, tr. T.J. Saunders modified, author's bracketed addition)

This passage is of utmost importance.¹⁴¹ First, the introduction of soul is rather sudden. It would have been possible for Plato to simply attribute the perverse decision of the non-religious person to a bad decision of her soul, while leaving open the possibility that the order of the universe is produced by the cosmic force mentioned above, thus claiming that an individual soul might make decisions or hold beliefs that go counter to the design of the universe. Yet that is not what he does. Plato specifically points out that the checkers-player's task is limited to moving the souls on the board – promoting or demoting the souls according to the amelioration or deterioration they cause to themselves or undergo on account of other souls. That is to say, the universe is in fact left to the operations and decisions of souls, who interact with each other, and who make decisions of their own, for better or worse. This can be read as another confirmation that souls are responsible for the vicissitudes of the universe. The cosmic force, for its part, sanctions the souls according to their decisions and acts, thus making them 'meet the fate they deserve' (using the term μοῖρα for the fated order of things, very much in parallel with εἰμαρμένη).¹⁴² In that sense, as Plato goes on, the checkers-player makes the task of the gods rather easy, since their care does not involve changes of forms or patterns:

I fancy I could explain how easy it is for gods to control the universe, in the following way. Suppose that in one's constant efforts to serve its interests one were to mould all that is in it by *transforming* (μετασηματίζων) everything (by turning fire into water permeated by soul, for instance), instead of producing variety from a basic unity or unity from variety, then after the first or second or third stage of creation everything would be arranged in an infinite number of perpetually changing patterns. (*Laws* X, 903e–904a, tr. T.J. Saunders modified, his emphasis)

Thus, the order in the universe sets itself forth (by means of soul, as we read in the previous passage, and as will be stated again in the next). The uniformity of nature, based on the production of diversity from a basic unity, warrants an easy task for the gods who control the universe: they do not have to invent every single thing anew, but can rely on existing patterns and sorts, just like the *Timaeus*' Demiurge looks at the Model that dictates how the world order should look.

In the subsequent passage, this cosmological order is further explained, again with continuous reference to the operation of soul:

¹⁴¹ It is surprising to see that this passage receives hardly any attention from the part of the recent upholders of a metaphysical interpretation. Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, does not refer to it, and Bordt, *Platons Theologie*, mentions it only in the margins (pp. 212–13 and 251–2).

¹⁴² Cf. also *Laws* IX, 873c: ἡ τῆς εἰμαρμένης μοῖρα, and the occurrences of this meaning of μοῖρα, quoted above, p. 113, fn. 139.

Ath.: In fact the supervisor finds his task remarkably easy.¹⁴³

Clin.: Again, what do you mean?

Ath.: This. Our King saw (a) that all actions are a function of soul and involve a great deal of virtue and a great deal of vice, (b) that the combination of body and soul, while not an eternal creation like the gods sanctioned by law, is nevertheless indestructible (because living beings could never have been created if one of these two constituent factors had been destroyed),¹⁴⁴ (c) that one of them – the good element in soul – is naturally beneficial, while the bad element naturally does harm. Seeing all this he contrived a place for each constituent where it would most easily and effectively ensure the triumph of virtue and the defeat of vice throughout the universe. (*Laws X*, 904a–b, tr. T.J. Saunders)

Therefore, the ‘supervisor’ or ‘king’ has as his sole task to place souls in the position that suits them best to accomplish a virtuous life, while leaving it over to them to determine the direction of their decisions, and to take responsibility for their own life choices (904b–c; the passage is quoted above, p. 45). This idea of the soul’s ‘natural place’ being designed to serve the purposes of structuring the universe is taken up as a matter of fate:

So all things that contain soul change, the cause of their change lying within themselves, and as they change they move according to the ordinance and law of destiny (κατὰ τὴν τῆς εἰμαρμένης τάξιν καὶ νόμον). (*Laws X*, 904c, tr. T.J. Saunders)

This phrase links the order of the universe to fate (εἰμαρμένη) in an undeniable way. It is fate that allows souls to change themselves, for the better or the worse, laying down the ordinance and law (τάξις καὶ νόμος) according to which this change of soul may happen. Fate is thus linked to the soul’s positions in the universe as

¹⁴³ *Laws X*, 904a: νῦν δ’ ἔστι θαυμαστὴ ῥαστώνη τῷ τοῦ παντός ἐπιμελουμένῳ. I take it that this phrase introduces the next part of the discussion, rather than concluding the previous one. In my reading, the ‘easy task of the supervisor’ is distinct from the ‘easy task of the gods’. The description of the gods’ task in the previous passage followed from the statement that every soul has its appropriate position in the universe (the gods’ position being to control the world of genesis). The ‘supervisor’, on the other hand, who was introduced in 903b as the one ‘who arranged everything with an eye to its preservation and excellence’, has as his task to reward virtue and goodness of souls. Both tasks are light and easy because of the inherent structure of the universe.

¹⁴⁴ This does not mean that any combination of soul and body is indestructible – which would be totally un-Platonic – but that there will always be combinations of body and soul: if one of both constituents were absent, the world of becoming would indeed cease to exist. Cf. Herwig Görgemanns, *Beiträge zur Interpretation von Platons Nomoi, Zetemata*, 25 (Munich, 1960), p. 204. That the ‘gods sanctioned by law’ (οἱ κατὰ νόμον ὄντες θεοί) are referred to as eternal combinations of body and soul may be a reference to the celestial gods who are always combined with a celestial body, or at least to the gods who govern nature; cf. above, pp. 76–7.

described in the previous passage, where the souls are said to be placed in the best possible positions to realize virtue and goodness. In other words: the order and law of fate (εἰμαρμένη) is installed by the 'supervisor' / 'king' / 'checkers-player' who is a personification of the metaphysical principles of goodness and the Forms.¹⁴⁵ The imagery of this personification should not be given too much weight, as Plato's terminology is not fixed and his intention with this passage is obviously not to elaborate some kind of hierarchic world-system (in which the supervisor's or checkers-player's relation to the Forms and the Good, and possibly also the Demiurge, would have to be clearly defined). Rather, he wants to point out how souls will eventually meet their fate, while the context suggests that we are dealing with a personification of Plato's metaphysical principles as a whole, which set the stage for his gods' tasks. It is by observing these principles that the gods have the light task of bringing order to and controlling the sensible world. And the 'fate the souls deserve' (ἡ προσηκούση μοῖρα, 903e), on the basis of their free acts and decisions, is also easily bestowed upon them by the order of the universe, as the principles of just deserts are clearly laid down.

Now, this reward or punishment for the behaviour of souls is not directly meted out by the 'supervisor'. Rather, it is imparted by the gods:

In spite of your belief that the gods neglect you, my lad, or rather young man, *This is the sentence of the gods that dwell upon Olympus (Od. xix, 43) – to go join worse souls as you grow worse and better souls as you grow better. (Laws X, 904e, tr. T.J. Saunders, author's bracketed addition)*

In this text, which introduces the Athenian's final rejoinder to the issue at stake – that the gods care about human beings – his reference to the *Odyssey* clearly takes up traditional patterns of speech, but it also indicates that to Plato's mind, it is the gods who make the punishment and reward operable.¹⁴⁶ This is their task of 'looking after human beings'. But it is the 'checkers-player' himself who sets up the framework within which all souls play their part, and are *bound* to play their part in the place where he situates them. He thus binds the world's actors to their destiny, like fate – εἰμαρμένη or μοῖρα – had done of old.

To conclude this section, we may say that rather than being merged with his metaphysics, Plato's theology elaborates the ways in which his divine beings play a role in a cosmos ruled by the Good and the intelligible realm of Being. To Plato, such metaphysical principles – Being, the Good – were not gods (just as in previous

¹⁴⁵ One may also see a close parallel between the image of a checkers-player / King / supervisor, and that of the god who, as a 'planter' (φουτοργός), is the maker of Form (*Rep. X*, 597c–d). *Contra* Luc Brisson, 'Le divin planteur (φουτοργός)', *Kairos*, 19 (2002), pp. 31–48, who identifies the φουτοργός with the Demiurge. That would again entail difficulties, in that the Demiurge would have to be the creator of the Model (a thesis not supported by the *Timaeus*).

¹⁴⁶ Cf. *Polit.* 271c, where the gods are described as the executors of μοῖρα after death.

Greek theology, fate wasn't seen as a god), but rather structuring principles that impose themselves on *all* beings, including the gods. Plato's metaphysics and theology could thus co-exist without deifying his metaphysical principles or seeing the gods as omnipresent or omnipotent, personified, metaphysical entities. The status of Plato's gods is therefore 'lower' (if one insists on presenting things in a hierarchy) than his metaphysical principles, just as the traditional Greek gods are 'subjected' to the force of necessity and fate.¹⁴⁷ What Plato does, then, to purify the representation of the gods, is to say that the force that binds the gods is not sheer fate, but rather the principles of the Good and of the intelligible Model that structure the whole universe.

The Platonic gods thus enter into his cosmology and ethics (which are alike ruled by the Good and the intelligible Forms): they are individuals who will have to take care of the part of the universe attributed to them, by safeguarding the order of the world of becoming, and by supervising people's moral behaviour and piety.

In that sense, Plato's theology represents a genuine transition between the Pre-Socratics and Aristotle, articulating the intelligible structure of the universe as something that can be discussed in its own right (over against the Pre-Socratics, whose frame of reference was always determined by the material nature of the universe), without, however, identifying the gods with these structures in an Aristotelian fashion. In this respect, then, Plato's theology skirts the Aristotelian merger with metaphysics as a discussion of 'being qua being' and as a research into the 'highest being'. According to Plato, the gods are 'composite beings', participating in the intelligible Forms; they are not themselves those Forms. Neither is the Idea of the Good to be seen as Plato's god, even though it is obvious from and constitutive for Plato's theology that the gods must be good. The gods are souls endowed with intellect, through which Plato's metaphysical principles become operative. Those metaphysical principles have their own existence, of course, as 'true being', but they can only operate through the gods' souls.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Brochard, 'Le devenir dans la philosophie de Platon', p. 98: 'Façonnés par vingt siècles de Christianisme, nos esprits modernes hésitent devant une conception qui pourrait sembler impie et presque choquante. Est-il rien pour nous de supérieur à Dieu? Il n'en était pas ainsi pour les Grecs. Au-dessus des Dieux les Grecs plaçaient le Destin'. Rather than to Christianity, I would trace back this presupposition of our 'modern minds' to Aristotelian metaphysics.

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Conclusion

The metaphysical interpretation of Plato's theology sets out from a false premise, namely that Plato's god must be a metaphysical principle in the image and likeness, so to speak, of Aristotle's god.¹⁴⁸ In the traditional Aristotelian view, metaphysics naturally and organically leads to theology, as god is the highest being, meaning the highest principle in the universe. But in Plato the situation is different. Plato's metaphysical principles (the Good and the Forms) may be termed 'divine', but they are not 'gods'. Plato's gods are individuals, meaning individual souls, who are bound to their position by the fate-like laws imposed by his metaphysical principles. They have their own tasks, their own ranges of operation in the universe, and they care about 'lower' beings; but they are not all-embracing principles. They are souls who are *fated* and *enjoined* to be good by the force of the truly good and 'binding' principle (*Phd.* 99c) that installs them to transmit the order of goodness, and to sanction good or evil behaviour of souls. Thus, the gods enact the order of the universe, and transmit the metaphysical principles to the realm of Becoming.

In that sense, the metaphysical principles of the Good and the Forms are setting the stage as a framework, comparable to fate (εἰμαρμένη) in the old tragic and Homeric worldview, which all souls have to observe and abide by. Those who fail to do so, by their own free decision, will be punished by the gods, while those who decide to do the good will be rewarded. Thus, the Platonic moral order fully reflects the structure of his universe. What Plato did was restate the force of fate (εἰμαρμένη) in terms of goodness and morality, and of an order that reflects the intelligible Forms. That is why his 'patterns' for theology are so adamant that the gods *must* be good and truthful: they are bound to be so by their submission to the metaphysical structures that underlie any order.

When read from this angle, Plato's repeated statement that intellect does not exist apart from soul is no longer inimical to the analysis of his gods, and can

¹⁴⁸ We have seen how Bordt's solution to 'open questions' consisted in having recourse to Aristotle's theology. Also Menn's conclusion is telling: 'The speech of Timaeus does not state all these doctrines, and indeed it contradicts some of them, but it sets standards (which it only partially meets) of explanation through *nous*, which suggest that this set of doctrines or something like it must be incorporated in any ultimately acceptable account of the origin of order in the universe. If Aristotle holds all of these doctrines, this is not simply the result of bias in my exposition of Plato, but neither does it show that Plato and Aristotle are in harmony, that the *Timaeus* allegorically contains all these Aristotelian doctrines. It simply shows that Aristotle (like every Old Academic), formulated his cosmological and theological doctrines by way of response to the *Timaeus*, attempting to replace Plato's mythical account with an account that would be recognized as superior by Plato's own standards.' (Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, p. 61).

be accepted without looking for a back door through which a separate existence of intellect can be saved after all. Νοῦς (intellect) can be explained along the lines of Menn's interpretation, namely as the perfect performance of the activity of thinking, but paradoxically, this view can only stand when it is cut off from Menn's main premise that 'voῦς' is god, meaning that intellect has a separate existence. That is to say, Menn rightly points out that 'intellect' is 'the activity of thinking', but, to my mind, this means that it must be performed by a soul, and hence, that it cannot be a separate principle. The intellect does *not* exist separately, as a metaphysical principle, like the Good and the Ideas exist separately in the intelligible world. 'Noῦς' is the activity of thought that is performed by rational souls: intellect looks at the intelligible Forms ('the Model') and thus acts as a structuring principle in the sensible universe. That is the main task of the gods, each of whom takes care of a fated share in the sensible universe. If, then, 'voῦς' is god, it can only refer to the perfect activity that is performed by the divine souls.

To conclude, I hope to have made clear that for Plato, the gods are not to be identified the metaphysical principles he accepts. Or to put it by way of a counterfactual argument: *if*, for Plato, the gods were identical with his metaphysical principles, it would have been much easier for him to define their nature, once and for all, as intelligible principles; yet that is never what he does. He takes a more difficult position, by maintaining traditional characterizations of the gods, or by qualifying the gods as composed and dissoluble beings whose compound existence is also deathless, and will never cease.

The question should be, then, why Plato resists a straightforward metaphysical definition of the gods. Why isn't the Aristotelian view a viable option for him? The answer to this lies, perhaps, in the nature of his metaphysical principles themselves: they have a separate existence in a transcendent world, and the visible universe displays only remote images of or participations in them. The definition of the gods, on the other hand, as we have seen in the *Laws* Book X, implies that they care about us (or about that part of the universe which has been assigned to them) – that the world is their concern. It might well be on the basis of that characteristic of the gods that Plato never ventured to view the gods as principles. After all, the Platonic gods are linked to the world of genesis as their fief, and they operate, along the lines set out by the metaphysical principles, in the world of becoming.

Is Plato's account, then, more 'primitive' or 'archaic' than the Aristotelian one? On the one hand, it certainly is. If the analysis given in this book is correct, Plato's worldview is, in certain respects, more akin to that of Homer and the tragic poets than to Aristotle's metaphysics – despite the fact that Plato 'modernized' the traditional view by introducing a moral purification on the basis of his metaphysical claims about the goodness of the universe. On the other hand, however, Plato's views contain an unmistakable element that – at least to my mind – increases their merit, and lifts them over and above the Aristotelian account. In Plato, the final principle that determines the whole universe remains transcendent, as the Idea of the Good is unknowable and unattainable. This means that no one, not even the gods, fully exhaust the Good's nature, and that all players on the 'checkers board' have to play

their part despite an ultimate lack of knowledge of where the universe is headed. Of course, there are clear signs and tokens while we are underway: our soul senses the presence of the Good when it is there (e.g., in Beauty), but there is an important caveat, within the frame of Platonic metaphysics, which says that we never fully understand the nature of this goodness. Aristotle is a different case: when we think, we become divine; we become *god* for as long as we think, an activity that is only impeded by the necessities of our human life (eating, drinking, fatigue, sorrows, etc.). Yet in the performance of our highest activity, we *are* gods.¹⁴⁹ Plato would be far more reticent: according to him, we can only become god ‘in so far as possible’ (κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν).¹⁵⁰ For Plato a full divinization is impossible, not because of mundane impediments (as in Aristotle), but as a matter of cosmic order. And even if we were to succeed in becoming god: Plato’s gods do not themselves fully know the Good. This alone should prevent anyone from claiming to *know* what god wants them to do – that is, from becoming religious fanatics – let alone from claiming to *own* the Good that buoys the entire universe. In that sense, Plato’s religion, which ultimately admonishes us to be moderate by taking god as the measure, is the logical consequence of his theological and metaphysical insights, and leads to a genuine religious attitude, in which the divine is never subsumed under our human measures and standards.

¹⁴⁹ Arist., *Nic. Eth.* X, 1177a12–1179a32; cf. *Metaph.* XII 7, 1072b15.

¹⁵⁰ Plato, *Theaet.* 176b; *Symp.* 207d; *Rep.* X, 619a.

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