

The Providence of the Gods: Plato's *Laws*, Book X

In Book X of the *Laws*, Plato (through the voice of the Athenian Stranger, or Guest) presents three theses regarding the Gods: that there are Gods; that the Gods exercise providence over the entire cosmos, even down to its smallest parts; and that the Gods are impassive, insofar as they are not swayed (we might say, “bought off”) by offerings or sacrifices. The Athenian Stranger and his companions conclude that it is necessary that citizens of their ideal city accept all three of these propositions. But throughout their discourse, they also affirm that the most appropriate way of gaining that acceptance is through the power of persuasion.

While there are many depths which we might plumb regarding each of these three theses, we'll start with the larger overall structure of Plato's thought: specifically, the ways in which these three elements are interconnected. As we'll see, each subsequent claim is, in some important ways, an unfolding or elaboration of the argument(s) which came before it. And this in itself suggests some valuable lessons about Platonic theology and metaphysics—that is, about the ways that Platonists speak about the Gods and examine the organizing principles of the world.

In presenting his arguments that there are Gods, the Stranger frames his discourse as a response to a very modern-sounding objection or alternative view:

GUEST. It appears (they say) that the greatest and most beautiful things are produced by nature and fortune, but lesser things by art; which receiving from nature the generation of great and primary works, fashions and fabricates all smaller works, which we all of us denominate artificial.¹

They say that fire and water, earth and air, subsist from nature and fortune, and not from art. That the bodies also, which are posterior to these, viz. of the earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars, are generated through these, which are entirely destitute of soul. They add, that, all things being casually borne along by the impulse of fortune, they became in a certain respect properly harmonized together, viz. the hot with the cold, the dry with the moist, the soft with the hard; and, in short, that all things of a contrary temperament were, from necessity, through fortune mingled together. That, besides this, the whole of heaven, with all that it contains, all animals and plants, and the seasons of the year, were produced after this manner: not (they say) through intellect, or any divinity, nor yet through art, but, as we have said, from nature and fortune.²

In modern terms, we might summarize this position as “art imitates nature”—that in the order of things, the products of intellect, of thoughtful deliberation and planning, take second place after natural things, which (on this view) are the result of mere chance.

The core of the Stranger's response is to distinguish between two kinds of motion: “that which is able to move other things, but is always incapable of moving itself,” and “that which is always able to move both itself and other things.”³ The Platonic tradition identifies these as the motions that are characteristic of nature, and of soul, respectively.

GUEST. When one thing moves another, and something else always moves this, will there ever among such things as these be any thing which is first moved? But how is it possible that a thing which is moved by another can ever be the first of things changed? It is certainly impossible. But when a thing moving itself causes motion or change in something else, and this latter in some other, and ten thousand things

1 *Laws* X, 889a. All translations are by Thomas Taylor, occasionally with slight modifications.

2 889c-d.

3 894b.

are thus moved in succession — in this case, will there be any other principle of all these, than the motion of that which moves itself?⁴

And later:

CLINIAS. Do you say, that the being moved by itself is the definition of that essence which we all denominate “soul”?

GUEST. I do say so. But if this be the case, do we yet desire it should be more sufficiently shown, that soul is the same with the first generation and motion of things which now are, have been, and shall be; and, again, of all the contraries to these; since it appears that soul is the cause of all mutation and motion to all things?

CLIN. Certainly not. For it has been sufficiently shown, that soul is the most ancient of all things, and is the principle of motion.

GUEST. Will not, therefore, the motion which subsists through another in another, but which is never the cause of a thing moving itself, be the second in order? and ought it not to be placed after the former motion, by whatever interval of numbers any one may choose to assign, since it is truly the mutation of an inanimate body?

CLIN. Right.⁵

The Stranger will then conclude by gesturing toward Intellect which, in its turn, is metaphysically situated even before Soul. For where Nature is moved by another, and Soul is moved by itself, Intellect is altogether unmoved.

GUEST. Soul, therefore, by its motions, leads every thing in heaven, earth, and the sea; and the names of these motions are: willing, considering, taking care of, consulting, forming true and false opinions, rejoicing, grieving, daring, fearing, hating, loving, together with all such primary motions as are allied to these, and which, receiving the secondary motions of bodies, lead all things to increase and decay, separation and concretion, and to things consequent to these [...] and, lastly to all things which, soul employing, when it perpetually receives a divine intellect, governs all things rightly and well; but when it is conjoined with folly, it produces every thing contrary to these. Shall we admit that these things subsist in this manner, or shall we yet doubt whether they might somehow subsist differently?

CLIN. By no means.

GUEST. Shall we say, therefore, that the genus of soul which is prudent, and full of virtue, governs heaven and earth, and the whole period of generated nature, or that which possesses neither of these? Are you willing, therefore, that we should answer this question as follows?

CLIN. How?

GUEST. Thus, O wonderful man. If the whole path of the heavens, and the local motion of all the natures it contains, possess a nature similar to the motion, circulation, and reasonings of intellect, and proceed in a manner allied to these, it must evidently be granted, that the most excellent soul takes care of the whole world, and leads it according to a path of this kind.

CLIN. Right.⁶

4 894e—895a.

5 896a-b.

6 896e—897c.

We must appeal, then, not merely to a Soul of the world that imparts motion to Nature, but even more, such a soul must itself be allied with an Intellect which transcends it.

It's within this larger framework that Plato locates the providence of the Gods. Here, the Latin-derived word *providence*⁷ translates the Greek term *pronoia*; each of these is formed from a root meaning “thought” or “intellect,” together with the prefix *pro-*, “in advance.” This is the same structure that we see in the English word *forethought*. So the concept of providence will include two interconnected components: knowing in advance what is needful, and acting on that basis of that knowledge, such that those needs are met.

The seeds of these are already present, inasmuch as the Stranger has just shown that Intellect must precede and account for Soul, just as Soul precedes and accounts for Nature. Taking as given that the Gods have the power that is needed to create the cosmos, the Stranger goes on to consider how such powerful beings might nonetheless neglect small, nearly insignificant things, such as human affairs. There are, he suggests, only two ways this could happen:

Either because he thinks the neglect of small things is of no consequence to the whole; or, if he thinks it is of consequence, yet he pays no attention to them, through indolence and luxury. Or is it possible that negligence can take place in any other way? For, when any one is incapable of taking care of all things, and, in consequence of this, neglects either such as are small, or such as are great, he is not in this case said to be negligent.⁸

In this way, Plato gives us a triadic structure, consisting of knowledge, power, and will, as the basic requisites for providence. If any of these is lacking, so too the Gods' providence will be lacking; but if all are present, then we must accept the providence of the Gods.

The Stranger addresses the will of the Gods most fully in the third part of his argument, when he considers divine impassivity. For now, we can simply note that because the Gods, by their very nature, “are good from the possession of every virtue,”⁹ including the virtue of fortitude (as opposed to the vice of timidity),

We must acknowledge that it is impossible for them ever to act in an indolent and luxurious manner... For, in us, indolence is the offspring of timidity, but sluggishness, of indolence and luxury. ... But the Gods cannot be negligent through indolence and sluggishness: for timidity is not present with them.¹⁰

And so, the Gods—insofar as they are Gods—could not possibly lack either the power or the will for providence. That leaves the Stranger to consider their knowledge: could the Gods possibly think that “the neglect of small things is of no consequence to the whole”?

GUEST. Small things are seen and heard with greater difficulty than large things. But to carry, govern, and take care of a few things, and such as are small, is in every respect more easy than to carry, govern, and take care of the contraries to these.

CLIN. It is by far more easy.

GUEST. But since it is the province of a physician to take care of a certain whole, and he is both willing and able to do this, will this whole ever be in a good condition if he neglects the parts, and such things as are small?

7 *Providence* is, of course, the English adaptation; the original Latin term was *providentia*.

8 901b-c.

9 *Laws* X, 900d. Indeed, as Proclus will emphasize, the Gods do not merely *possess* the virtues: they are the *source and origin* of the virtues.

10 901e.

CLIN. By no means.

GUEST. But neither will things numerous and mighty ever be well conducted either by pilots, or commanders of an army, or certain political characters, or any others similar to these, without an attention to things few and small. For builders say, that great stones cannot be well placed without small ones.

CLIN. For how can they?

GUEST. We ought not, therefore, to think that divinity is more vile than mortal artificers: for the more skillful mortal artificers are, the more accurately and perfectly, from one art, do they accomplish things small and great pertaining to their peculiar works. Since this is the case, can it be supposed that divinity, who is most wise, and who is both willing and able to act providentially, will alone take care of great things, but by no means of such as are small, which it is easy to take care of, like one indolent, or timid, or sluggish through labour?

CLIN. We can by no means admit this opinion, O guest, concerning the Gods; for this would be forming a conception neither holy nor true.¹¹

It remains only for the Stranger to consider whether Gods such as these—the unmoved source of the cosmos, and of all virtues—would be swayed by sacrifices.

GUEST. He who asserts that the Gods always pardon unjust men, when a part of their unjust acquisitions is offered to them, asserts at the same time that they are like dogs, to whom wolves give a small portion of their rapine, and who, becoming mild by gifts, permit them to plunder the herds. Is not this the assertion of those who consider the Gods as easily appeased?

CLIN. It is.

GUEST. But will not he be the most ridiculous of all men, who assimilates the Gods to any of the above-mentioned guardians? Shall we say, therefore, that they resemble pilots, who giving themselves up to the libation of wine, and the odour of flesh, destroy both the ships and the sailors?

CLIN. By no means. [...]

GUEST. But are not all the Gods the greatest of all guardians, and guardians of the greatest affairs?

CLIN. Very much so.

GUEST. Shall we say, then, that those who are the guardians of the most beautiful things, and who, as guardians, are transcendent in virtue, are worse than dogs, and men of a moderate character, who never betray justice by receiving in an unholy manner gifts from unjust men?

CLIN. By no means; for such an assertion is not to be borne. And he who entertains such an opinion may most justly be considered as the worst and most impious of men.¹²

11 902c—903a.

12 906d—907b.