A History of Philosophy
06 Plato on God
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Okay, this afternoon we want to come to the third major topic in our thinking about Plato, God, and the Cosmos. And the transition comes very naturally from his Theory of Forms. You might take note of this additional way in which he speaks of the overall arrangement of things in the total universe of being.

He distinguishes between being, becoming, and non-being. Where, of course, becoming is the state of change. Characteristic, therefore, of the world of particulars.

This physical, natural world. Being is the realm of the unchanging, the eternal. The realm, therefore, of thought.

And non-being is what? It is total privation of thought. It is nothing in particular, playing on this. There is nothing in non-being, which is in the world of particulars.

It's nothing in particular. And so it's nothing. And the question is, how do particulars come to be? And we'll notice there's some ambiguity in Plato's thinking.

Plato does not himself anticipate the later Christian doctrine that creation is ex nihilo, out of nothing, out of non-being. No, that's not Plato. Whatever God Plato may be trying to conceptualize is not a God who is creator ex nihilo, as the Judeo-Christian God is.

Plato's God is more of a shaper, an organizer. Yes, sir. But if non-being, then, is not conceived of as absolutely nothing, in the ex nihilo sense, what is it that is nothing in particular? Yes, sir.

Well, a thing is the particular thing it is, by participating in the forms. So that it participates in the nature of something, some quality, some kind of entity, species, or some kind of relationship. It has to participate in the nature of something in order to be something in particular.

So if it is form that gives particularity, what you have here is a realm of non-being that is the privation of all form, that is conceived of as some sort of primal matter. Primal matter. It's not at all clear what Plato might mean by that.

Does he mean that there are certain material elements that are and always were? Do you think? And out of that primal glop, particulars of certain kinds and so forth are literally formed. Informed. Well, that's the sort of picture that we have.

It's rather vague. We look at the materials and see what sort of shape it takes. But the question of God arises by virtue of giving attention to the realm of being.

Because so far, Plato has conceived that there is a vast collection of forms. You see? A form of this kind of thing, a form of that kind of thing, a form of the other kind of thing, umpteen forms. These forms are all real.

They have being. You see? They transcend this world of particular things. The transcendent realm is another realm of being.

They're separate from this realm. They seem to be separate from each other. They're ideals representing what the ideal good for that kind of thing that the form represents is.

So the question arises, what's the relationship between all these forms? If you're going to have a cosmos, a universe rather than a multiverse, there are relationships of some sort between the various forms. Something that unifies them. In which they all, as it were, participate.

You see? There must be, in other words, a form of all the forms. A form of formness. An ideal of idealness.

And since to be a form is to be good and ideal, Plato conceives of a form of the good. Not a form of a good this, a good that, a good the other. Particular kinds of forms, as it were.

But a form of formness, a form of idealness, a form of the good. And it's that notion which he develops in the Republic. The idea of a form of the good.

That starts his gradually developing conception of one transcendent, supreme kind of being. That pushes his thinking in the direction of, well, what some people have called a kind of theism. There's a book on Plato by a Cambridge philosopher, A.E. Taylor, and it's said of that book that he makes Plato into a good Episcopalian.

It may be overstating it. But Plato's groping for this conception of a supreme transcendent good being is plainly groping in the direction of some sort of a good God. Now, take a look at the handout I just circulated.

And if there are spares, make sure they come back to me. And the segment at the top left from the Republic, section 509, is the standard numbering of the pages of the Republic. And he's just introducing this conception of the good.

This reality, he says, gives their truth to the objects of knowledge. What are the objects of knowledge? Forms. Okay.

What gives their truth, their reality, as objects of knowledge to those objects of knowledge? And gives the power of knowing to the knower, making it possible for us to know the forms. Well, what makes this possible, you must say, is the idea of the good. Sure.

What makes it possible for the prisoner in Plato's cave to see not just the shadows on the wall, but to see real things in the light that comes through the mouth of the cave? What is it? The sun. And in the cave analogy, he pictures the prisoner released going out into the daylight and climbing the hill to get a vision of the sun. The source of light that makes it possible for us to know, to see with the eye of the mind.

The forms. You see? So that which gives truth to the objects of knowledge, the power of knowing to the knower, is the form of the good, the idea of the good. And you must conceive it as being the cause of knowledge and of truth in so far as known.

Yet, fair as they both are, knowledge and truth, in supposing it to be something fairer still than these, you will think rightly. It's more than just the source of knowledge. Truth.

But as for knowledge and truth, even as in our illustration it's right to deem light and vision sun-like, like the source of all, you see? But never to think that they are the sun, the source of all. So here it's right to consider these two, knowledge and truth. As being like the good, the form of the good, bonny form.

But to think that either of them is the good, is not right. Still higher honor belongs to the possession and the habit of the good. And then the interjector says, an inconceivable beauty you speak of.

If it's the source of knowledge and truth, and yet surpasses them in beauty. What is it in itself, you see? And a little further down, the sun, I presume you'll say, not only furnishes the visibles the power of visibility, but also provides for their generation and growth and nurture. Though it's not itself generation.

Well, in like manner then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive the presence of the good, but receive from the presence of the good they're being done, and their very existence and essence or nature is derived to them from it. Though the good is not essence, it transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power. So the good is the source of knowledge, the source of the existence of forms, the source of the nature, the various natures of things, forms, you see? Now, when he says source, does he mean the originator in the sense of source as beginning or source as that on which everything is constantly dependent? Well, I think it's clear he means the latter.

That they have their being by being in relationship to the form of the good. If he means it literally that the various forms of themselves, eternal, then the question of origin doesn't arise. Well, he gets back to that sort of thing later on.

Okay, now in the Parmenides, and I have written these names of the various dialogues so that you can catch them. In the Parmenides, which you recall from our discussion of the segment in the text last week, the Parmenides talks about the one as distinct from the many. Okay? The good becomes, of course, the one.

Whereas the world of particulars, the world of change, represents the many. There is one form of the good. This is the one.

Incidentally, Platonism appealed not only to early Christianity but to Judaism as well. And if you want to get the point of connection, remember the famous Shema in the book of Deuteronomy. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one.

What? The one? That's good. See the connection? Well, in the Phaedrus, which you're outlining for this week, recall, he speaks of beauty itself as distinct from particular beauties. You see? The one, the good, goodness itself, beauty itself, in which beautiful things participate.

Well, taking it from that point, his later writings push in two directions, at least on the surface they seem like two directions, though in reality they're one. The first is in the direction of cosmology. The second is in the direction of moral order.

Oh, there we go again. The cue from the pre-Socratics. By virtue of the one, which is the good, the form of all formness, there is order to the cosmos, rational order, what Heraclitus called logos-structure.

But by virtue of the fact that the form of formness is the good, the good is to be imitated. We are to be like the good. And you get a notion of moral order as well as cosmic order.

The macrocosm, the cosmos. The microcosm, the city-state, and the individual moral life. And the source of order in both is the good, the form of the good.

Well, that begins to emerge in relationship, on the surface, it seems, to cosmology in the Timaeus. And you have some selection from the Timaeus, we'll look at in a little while. In the Timaeus, he speaks of an artificer and a world soul.

I made a mistake there; I wrote down the laws. Okay, that should have been the Timaeus. In the Timaeus, he speaks of an artificer and a world soul.

And talk of the world soul recurs in the laws, the Philebus, and the Sophist. In a shorter span than in the Timaeus. Now, what is this artificer? Well, an artificer is etymologically one who makes art.

One who works. The Greek term is demiurge, demiurgos. And that's a workman.

A workman. So, here you have a picture of a cosmic workman. Cosmic artificer.

And of this artificer, Plato says, being good, he desired that all things would be good. And so made them according to forms. That's difficult to know how literally to take this.

Because it's a passage where Plato seems to leave aside his method of having Socrates engage people in dialogue and pull it all out in conversation. Instead, Plato makes a speech and tells what he calls a likely story. As if the capacity for clear conceptualisation and literal statement is, as it were, running into all sorts of mist and cloud and conceptual barriers.

And so it could be that the way in which he personifies this demiurge is not to be taken literally as if this is a personal deity. It's hard to say. But at least he finds the language of personal deity the best for saying what he wants.

However, literally, he wants it. But notice that the demiurge, the artificer, is good. As if to say, now the good that we've spoken about in the Republic is what I have in mind here.

The artificer, the good, is not simply an ideal, transcendent ideal to be admired. It was, after all, to be the source for the being of the forms. Why shouldn't it also be the source for the becoming of the cosmos? Being? Becoming? The source of the being of the cosmos.

And so he says, being good, he desired all things to be good. And so he made them according to forms. As if the ideas, the plan, were the artificer.

It makes him sound more like an architect than an actual workman. The Greeks had a rather Aristotelian view of things. Did I say Aristotelian? Aristocratic view of things.

So that being actually a workman and doing the work with your hands was below the dignity of the aristocrat. But to conceive of it and plan it, that's another matter. So he seems to think of the artificer as a planner, as an architect.

Who assigns to the world soul. World soul? Yeah, he seems to think of the cosmos as an animate thing, like a living creature. He uses that very phrase.

Body and soul. In fact, that notion is as old as the pre-Socratics and before. Did you notice the line when you were reading Thales? Do you remember Thales? The world is besouled and full of divinities.

Besouled? Does the world have a soul? Is it full of them? Yeah, because the concept of soul, the Greek word psyche, is very ambiguous. It's used for life, as is the Latin anima, used for both soul and life. You see? And so the Greeks thought that animals had souls.

And if you weren't particularly good in this life, you might become an animal in the next one. For those who held transmigration. You see? But here he's speaking of divinities, gods.

Likening the soul to gods, or is it that the word gods simply means some immaterial powers? Some beings that are not simply flesh and bones, the way we are. Nothing. Gods.

Well, in any case, what he has is a world soul. As if the cosmos is a living thing. Plato never heard of Newton's mechanistic universe.

A thing so dead. You see? The universe for the Greeks was not dead. It's alive! With its own powers.

Its own vitality. You see? That's why the 19th-century Romanticists in Berlin went back and studied Plato. You see? Because they saw nature as alive, too.

But this world soul, then, is the active power that shapes the cosmos in accordance with the forms. And the artificer gives it to the world soul that pervades all things and enlivens things and activates things to do so in accordance with the forms. Just as your soul should enliven and move your body to act in accordance with the good, the forms.

So the world soul, the whole cosmos, should be ordered according to the good. Cosmic order. Well, in the further comments that he makes on this in the Philebus and the Sarvis laws, there seems to be some connection between soul and reason.

Just as there is in the individual human soul. The rational soul is what orders the life. So with the world soul, it's as if it is the rational orderer.

You see? And you're going back to Heraclitus Logos, echoing that concept. Anaxagoras nous. In fact, it's in this sort of context that in the Philebus he applauds Anaxagoras for thinking in terms of that cosmic reason, the nous.

Even though Anaxagoras didn't go far enough. Well, we'll look at that cosmology in a little while in the Timaeus. But in the Thaetetus, his attention there goes more to the moral order side.

And look at the excerpt on the handout from the Thaetetus at the bottom of the first page. The speech by Socrates. Evils can never be done away with.

Because the good must always have its contrary. In the world of particulars, there are always opposite qualities. Light and dark.

Hot and cold. Dry and wet. The good must have its contrary, evil.

Nor have they any place in the divine world. But they must needs haunt this region of our mortal nature. In the realm of the eternal, there's no evil.

It's in this world. Now, we'll come back to that discussion of evil in a moment. But let's get the rest of the paragraph.

That's why we should make all speed to take flight from this world to the other. And that means becoming like the divine as far as we can. That is to become righteous, just, with the help of wisdom.

To be like God is the good we must seek. Nothing. It's no such easy matter to convince men that the reasons for avoiding wickedness and seeking goodness are not those which the world gives.

The right motive is not that one should seem innocent and good. There's the world of appearances that the rhetorician was after. Those sophists.

That's no better to my thinking than an old wives' tale. Let's take the truth this way. In the divine, there is no shadow of unrighteousness.

Only the perfection of righteousness. And nothing is more like the divine than any one of us who becomes as righteous as possible. With the least possible shadow of unrighteousness.

It's here that a man shows his true spirit and power. Or lack of spirit and nothingness. To know this is wisdom and excellence of a genuine sort.

Not to know it is blind and base. So the form of the good has moral significance. The form of the good provides the model, the ideal for the moral life.

In the statesman, where he's talking about politics, he likens God, and he uses the term God, to a statesman shepherding his people. Likens the statesman to a

shepherd, and therefore likens God to a statesman shepherding his people. That type of care for their well-being.

And in the laws, he speaks of God as a self-moving world soul. As if he has erased the distinction between artificer and world soul. And made them one.

God is a self-moving world soul who knows all things. Cares about humans and their affairs. That's the shepherd bit.

Rewards good and evil. And gives excellence to nature as a whole. The God of the laws.

Well, that in broad outline is the developing picture of God that you get in Plato. It's fascinating. You'd never hesitate to say in the Republic, the form of the good simply, or the Parmenides with the one, that that's a theistic being.

You see? And yet by the time you get to the laws, timeus, it sounds more and more like that. And add the moral dimensions. The Timaeus, you get the initial impression, is simply about cosmology.

But if you read the whole of the Timaeus, the overarching purpose and concern is not about cosmology. But about the moral life. The care of the soul.

And he works into that through the notion of a cosmic order overseen by the good. Activated by a world soul. You see? So, the cosmology that Plato gets into is a means to the end of talking about the moral order.

In the individual life and in the life of the city-state. Let me pause there. Any questions? I want to get into the problem of evil, but let's take that juncture first.

Any questions? Yeah? I guess I don't really understand why the form of forms has to be the form of good. Why can't it be the form of love? Well, yeah. The form of something is what is the ideal, what is the archetype.

And the concept of the good is here the concept of what is excellent. It's excellence. So that if you're thinking in terms of degrees to which things participate in form.

You see? Then, at the very crowning top, is the notion of excellence. The highest of all good. Now, he doesn't want to name a particular good.

You see? But what is fine, what is good, what is excellent, he's not thinking just of moral good. You see? But of non-moral good as well. Notice how broadly we use the term good.

You see? We say good day. We speak of a good dog. A good meal.

You see? As well as a good deed and a good person. So the word good means simply excellence. Quality.

Ideal quality. So in that sense, it's the umbrella term. Whether you're speaking of goodness in knowing, which is having the truth.

Or goodness in the arts, which for him is a matter of beauty. You see? Or goodness in the moral life, which for him is being righteous or just. These are simply the way in which the good is manifested.

For him, the good was just the most formed to participate in form. It's the essence of being a form. Okay, legitimate question, let's plow into the problem of evil.

Obviously, evil represents disharmony. Whereas good in the cosmos is a matter of harmonious order. Everything fitting into its proper place.

Evil is a kind of disharmony. How do we account for harmony and disharmony both in the cosmos? Good and evil. Well, he gives different accounts, at least superficially different accounts, in different places.

In the Timaeus, he notices that in addition to the operation of reason, the world soul. There is also the operation of necessity. The Greek term anankhe, I guess we can transliterate it that way.

Necessity. Sort of the causal necessity of some blind fate. So there are, as it were, blind forces at work in nature in addition to the good.

And some put that together with what he says about non-being as if it were some primal material stuff. Unruly. With its own wantonness.

As if Plato were a metaphysical dualist. You have eternal matter, which you can't completely control. And you have an eternal soul, reason.

And evil occurs because matter, recalcitrant, resists reasonable order. Analogous to the way in which the human body, driven compulsively, subject to forces we don't control, gets out of hand. You get a dualistic interpretation.

That interpretation went off more into the Gnostic direction. The main line of thought after Plato, interpreting him, was more monistic. As if there are not two ultimate realities but only one.

Matter really is non-being. Nothing. And what you have then is form trying in particulars to manifest itself in a world of conflicting particulars.

Necessity of that sort. That becomes an idealist interpretation rather than a dualist interpretation. Everything that exists is of the nature of reason.

Soul. Thought. Form.

But there are manifestations of that. Which are phenomena. Appearances.

But not themselves realities. Well, that direction comes out in the Neo-Platonic movement that we'll be getting into down the track. So there is that uncertainty about this necessity and reason.

If you like, you can take the necessity to be natural forces. And so he's saying that if you fall out of a window and break your neck, what causes it? This isn't a rational universe, is it? Well, there are natural forces that get you into trouble if you're not careful. Now, in the laws, he makes a different enigmatic suggestion that seems to push in a dualist direction.

In addition to the one or the world soul, he refers to a dyad. D-Y-A-D. A dyad.

Which is literally a second. If a monad is a first, a dyad is a second. As if there is a second kind of something involved.

Does he mean anything more than natural forces? It's hard to say. But the fuller account is in the Statesman. And that's what I've put on the second page in the handout.

So let's take a look at that. Second page in the handout. What he has is certainly not a dualistic thing.

It's rather as if you have the interplay of opposing qualities in the physical world. You see, all the way from the pre-Socratics, when they were talking of elements, they were talking of opposing elements. You remember, like, Anaximander.

Who, because he found not only wet, like water, but also dry. And not only heat, but also cold. Refused to identify any one of the elements as ultimate.

And talked instead of his apiron, that undefined something. Well, Plato seems to have in mind that there are two opposing properties in the physical cosmos. And notice how he does this.

Top of the page. Listen, and you will hear. There is an era in which God himself assists the universe on its way and guides it by imparting its rotation to it.

But there's also an era in which he releases his control. He does this when its circuits, under his guidance, have completed their due limit of the time they're to be appointed. Thereafter, it begins to revolve in the contrary sense under its own impulse.

Because it's a living creature endowed with reason by him who framed it in the beginning. And this capacity for rotation in reverse is of necessity, native to it for a reason I must tell. Okay, do you get the picture? It's as if you wind up a spring and let it go.

And if you let it go, it's going to unwind. Get it? You've coiled up the garden hose, and then you turn the water on full pressure. And it uncoils itself.

It's as if there is something resistant to staying put in the hose, in the spring, in the cosmos. So, read on. Ever to be the same, steadfast and abiding is the prerogative of the divinest of things only.

The nature of the body doesn't entitle it to this rank. No, the bodily things are worlds of change. They don't stay put.

The heaven or the universe, as we've chosen to call it, has received many blessed gifts from him who brought it into being. But it's also been made to partake of bodily form. Thence it's impossible that it should abide forever free from change.

Yet its movement is uniform and variable in one place. Thus it is that it has received from God a rotation in reverse, the least possible variation of its proper motion. Yes, this negative motion is the least kind of negative you could have.

And there are certain things that happen as a result of that which are necessary to the overall functioning of a finite world, but they're not good. To revolve ever in the same sense belongs to none but the Lord and leader of all things. And even he cannot move the universe now in one sense, now in the other.

For all these reasons, there are many doctrines that are forbidden to affirm concerning the universe. We mustn't say that it moves itself, perpetually revolving in one and the same sense. We may not say that it's God who turns it in its entirety throughout all time in two opposite alternative revolutions.

We may not say that a pair of divinities makes it revolve alternatively in the opposed senses. He seems explicitly to reject dualism there. You see.

Not to a pair of opposing deities. We must, therefore, affirm the doctrine stated above, which is the remaining possibility. In one era, it's assisted by the transcendent divine cause, receiving renewal of life, immortality of contriving.

In the other era, when released, it moves by its own innate forces, storing up so much momentum at the time of its release that it can revolve in the reverse sense. And then the remaining paragraph is parallel, which comes a few pages later. It's from God's act when he set it in its order that it received all the virtues it possesses.

While it's from its primal chaotic condition, like that primal chaos, that primal glop, that all the wrongs and evils arise in it. Evils which it engenders in turn in the living creatures within it. When it's guided by the divine pilot, it produces good but little evil in the creatures it raises and sustains.

But when it must travel on without God, things go well enough in the years immediately after he abandons control. But as time goes on and forgetfulness of God arises in it, the ancient condition of chaos begins to assert itself. And at last, as this cosmic era draws to a close, this disorder comes to a head.

A few good things it produces, it corrupts, and so forth. And then the God looks on it again, he who first set it in order. Beholding its troubles, anxious lest it sink, wracked by storms and confusion, be dissolved again in the bottomless abyss of unlikeness, he takes control of the helm once more.

So what he's doing is depicting sort of a cyclical cosmology. Cycles, as it were, of what do you want to say, ordered, rational harmony, and growing disharmony. Some of the pre-Socratics had similar cyclical cosmologies.

You remember that Anaximenes, who thought the basic element was air, thought of cycles of condensation and rarification. Integration, disintegration. That kind of cyclical process.

Rather a common notion to the ancient Greeks. It's echoed later on in Plato's political thinking as he thinks about alternative kinds of government that succeed one another in endless cycles through which a society moves. You see.

So that a benevolent kind of tyranny breeds the very antithesis when the benevolent ruler is gone. Look at the chaos in Russia after a heavy hand. Cycle, cycle, cycle.

So Plato seems to be thinking along those lines. So there's inherent instability in finite existence because it's the world of becoming and of change. So evil is a natural ingredient in the natural order of the finite physical universe.

It's a natural ingredient. The problem of natural evil, okay, problem of natural evil is then a problem in the very nature of a finite being rather than due to some moral thought. And we distinguish natural evil from moral evil to this day, of course.

Now, obviously, that view of evil isn't going to satisfy Christian theologians. But it helps to set up the problem of evil that they have to face. As we'll see in a little while.

Okay, other question? Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, in the forms which are eternal and unchanging, there is no evil.

The form of humanness is the unchanging ideal nature of humanness. Okay. It's when you get particular humans, embodied humans, that you get the counter tendency.

The ideal apple isn't one that's rotting. It's only when you get particular embodied apples that they rot. Um.

Yeah. Yeah. Of course, deism, the view that God created but isn't actively involved, is really an 18th-century development.

You could say, if you like, there's some anticipation of deism because God doesn't keep his hand constantly on the helm. To use Plato's analogy. Some see in it, well, as I've said, a kind of dualism.

In the later Neoplatonic development out of this, there's a kind of pantheism. Now, come on, Plato, make up your mind. Well, no, poor Plato, he anticipates, he precedes all of the clear delineation of those alternatives.

He's groping in the dark. Yeah. Um.

Yeah. Yeah. Yes.

Yes. Yeah, you see, the question is whether non-being means no eternal form but leaves open the possibility that there is an uncreated primal stuff. That's right.

You're speaking backwards; you're saying if there is something as a non-being, you can't say there is a non-being. Yeah, to say there is non-being in that case would not mean that non-being is identical with nothing, but just with nothing in particular. Okay.

Remember that phrase, nothing in particular? It's important. You thought it was cute, didn't you, when I said it? It was significant, not just cute. Okay, well, what remains on this topic is to take a run together through the Timaeus selection in the anthology, but we don't have time for that.

So let's start up with that on Wednesday, which will be a good way of stirring up any other questions on the subject before we get into the human soul, the microcosm. Thank you.