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Empirical and Dialogical Proofs of God's Existence in *Laws 10*¹

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In the *Republic* Socrates states that there will be “no cessation of evils in cities” until philosophers become kings (473d5). In the *Laws* Socrates’ provocative claim is revised to fit the more moderate and traditional context of the later dialogue. The Athenian Stranger reformulates Socrates’ statement in the following way: “there can be no rest from evils and toils for those cities in which some mortal rules rather than a god (*theos*) . . . [so] we should obey whatever within us partakes of immortality, giving the name “law” (*nomos*) to the distribution ordained by intelligence (*tēn tou nou dianomēn*)” (713e4-714a2).² The Athenian Stranger justifies this shift from the rule of philosophers to the rule of law by arguing that the *nomos* of the *Laws* is to be grounded in *nous* (957c5-7).

Book 10 of the *Laws* is intended to prove that the gods exist, care for us, and are not persuaded by bribes (885b7-9). The arguments put forward concerning the gods in Book 10 are described as “our noblest and best prelude (*kalliston te kai ariston prooimion*) on behalf of the laws” (887c1). In this paper I want to investigate how Plato establishes the fact that *nous*, “god, in the correct sense, for the gods” (897b2), exists. Some scholars have noted the “empirical” character of Plato’s arguments for the existence of god in *Laws 10*.³ While empirical facts do provide an important supplement to Plato’s theology, they do not comprise the whole or even most important part of that theology. Instead of looking at the technical or empirical arguments for god’s existence in *Laws 10*,⁴ I will examine how Plato’s commitment to dialogical conversation, where partners in *logos* work towards a shared understanding of the subject at hand,⁵ plays a foundational role in establishing the central principles of his theology.

It may seem peculiar that an emphasis on the centrality of dialogue in human life can lead to theological commitments of any sort, but this claim makes more sense when one examines

1 I am grateful to Robert Guay, Randy Friedman, Anthony Preus, and Tamsin Trelawny-Cassity for comments on this paper. Peter Cocozzella, Robert Guay, Anthony Preus, and Andrew Scholtz were kind enough to study the text of *Laws 10* with me during the summer of 2008, and I am grateful for their insights and dialogue.

2 Unless otherwise noted I am using the translation by Thomas Pangle, *The Laws of Plato* (University of Chicago: Chicago, 1980). For the Greek I am using John Burnet, *Platonis Opera* (Oxford: 1907), but I have also benefited from E. B. England’s *The Laws of Plato* (University of Manchester: Manchester, 1921) and Peter Steiner’s *Platon: Nomoi X* (Akademie Verlag: 1992).

3 For a lucid account of how Greek philosophers used the gods to explain natural phenomena, see L. P. Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy* (Routledge: London, 1990). Eventually, however, doubt concerning the gods of the *polis* led to disbelief in the celestial gods (*Apology* 26d-e; *Clouds* 380). In “Plato: The Creator of Natural Theology,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 36:1 (2004) : 103-127, Gerard Naddaf notes, “in my opinion, Plato’s greatest achievement is that all of the arguments that he employs in his proof of the existence of god are empirical; he relies neither on a demiurge, nor on the world of intelligible forms” : 119.

4 This has already been well done by others: Gerard Naddaf, “Plato: The Creator of Natural Theology”; John J. Cleary, “The role of theology in Plato’s *Laws*” in *Plato’s Laws and its historical significance*, ed. F. L. Lisi (2001): 125-140; Robert Mayhew, *Plato: Laws 10* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 2008).

5 My language and interpretation are here influenced by Gadamer’s early work *Plato’s Dialectical Ethics* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1991), originally written in 1931. For a good discussion of dialogue in the *Laws* see Christopher Gill, “The *Laws*—Is it a real dialogue?” in *Plato’s Laws: From Theory to Practice* (Academia Verlag, 2003): 42-47. Leo Strauss is probably right to characterize the level of dialectic in the *Laws* as “sub-Socratic,” *The Argument and Action of Plato’s Laws* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1975): 17.

two central tenets of Plato's theology: the priority of soul to matter and the existence of *nous*, a term which is used synonymously with *theos*. By engaging partisans of ancestral piety and scientific materialism in dialogue, Plato gets each party to agree to view the other as an ensouled being capable of engaging in *logos*. Here, the soul, taken as an entity that can give and respond to reasons, is shown to have a phenomenological priority to matter. *Nous* in its most exalted sense is the orderer of the cosmos, but it is also the virtue, Reason, by which human beings orient themselves in the world.⁶ Plato shows through the dialogue of *Laws 10* that human beings are able to orient themselves by *nous* through dialogical *logos*. Showing that *nous* exists as a constant possibility of human conversation and collective deliberation falls short of a deductive proof of the existence of either a cosmic demiurge or a traditional civic god. Nonetheless, this dialogical evidence of *nous* in human conversation is the essential starting point and core of Plato's theology.

Problems with Empirical Proofs in the *Laws*:

Empirical arguments, that is, arguments that appeal to sense experience or perception for support, do not form the heart of the theology of *Laws 10* because the Athenian rejects such arguments when they are offered by his Cretan interlocutor Kleinias. In response to those who doubt the existence of the gods, Kleinias argues: "First, there's the earth, the sun, the stars, and all things, and this beautiful orderliness (*diakekosmēmena kalōs*) of the seasons, divided into years and months" (886a2-4). Kleinias' response is an empirically grounded version of cosmological-teleological argument. Robert Mayhew, like Gerard Naddaf, expresses the reasonable view that Plato's own position "has a lot in common with what Kleinias presents here."⁷ However, the Athenian replies to Kleinias,

Now the arguments (*logoi*) of such men work (*exergazdantai*) the following effect: when you and I adduce evidence (*tekmēria*) that the gods exist, bringing forward these very things—sun and moon and stars and earth—as being gods and divine things, those who are convinced by these wise men would say that these things are earth and stones, and incapable of thinking anything about human affairs, however well decked-out (*peripepēmēna*) they may somehow be, with arguments (*logoisi*) that make them plausible. (886d3-e2)⁸

The wise men are not susceptible to Kleinias' cosmological-teleological *logos* because they are under the sway of a particular *logos* that treats theological arguments with suspicion.⁹ This suspicion renders them insusceptible to the "empirical" evidence (*tekmēria*) offered by Kleinias.

6 See Stephen Menn's *Plato on God as Nous* (Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale, 1995) for an excellent discussion of Plato's view of *nous*. Menn argues that *nous* is primarily to be understood as a virtue (20) and should be translated as "Reason" not "mind." Menn also argues that *nous* and the demiurge are the same entity and, therefore, *nous* is an efficient as well as formal cause (43ff). In this essay, I am only examining *nous* as a self-subsisting entity that souls can take up to orient themselves in the world. By taking up *nous*, souls become demiurgic, efficient causes, and *nous* is thereby a remote efficient cause. I will avoid the more troubling claim that *nous* can directly be an efficient cause, which would entail a complex discussion of whether the demiurge and *nous* have souls.

7 *Plato: Laws 10*: 62.

8 I have emended the first sentence of Pangle's translation here.

9 See LSJ on *peripessō*: A. bake a crust round : only metaph., disguise, "*onomati p. tēn mochthērian*" Ar.Pl.159 ; "*p. autas prosthetois*" deck themselves out. with false hair, Id.Fr.321 ; "*peplasmēnōs to pragma p.*" . Bato 7.6 ; "*p. ablabōs,*" cover over Marius without hurting him, Plu.Mar.37 . . . also "*rēmatiois periphtheis*" cajoled by words, Ar.V.668.

This passage shows that assessing the existence of god cannot proceed merely by the presentation of particular empirical facts, for particular empirical facts are only intelligible in light of a more general explanatory *logos* at work in a human soul. The first step to revising the corrupting atheistic *logos* is to remove the wise men's distrust and suspicion.¹⁰

Thumos and Inauthentic Speech:

After introducing Kleinias to the atheistic arguments and securing Kleinias' enthusiastic consent to provide arguments for the existence of the gods as part of their overall legislative endeavor (887b1-c4), the Athenian engages in a puzzling digression on *thumos* (anger or spiritedness) (887c5-888a6).¹¹ *Thumos* is a great obstacle to dialogue (888a6),¹² and Plato works in this section to free his interlocutors from this emotion in order to enter into an open discussion. While the discussion of *thumos* may have rhetorical or political implications, it also presents a methodological view of what counts as adequate knowledge. Analyzing an emotion similar to *thumos*, *phthonos* (envy), Hans-Georg Gadamer writes,

The claim to knowledge is confirmed by arrival at a shared understanding. The other person's agreement is the test of whether the *logos* that is given is really able to expound the facts of the matter in a convincing way. But here we find a specific possibility of inauthenticity to which speech, as a possibility of human existence, is subject . . . [true shared understanding requires] the exclusion of *phthonos*. *Phthonos* . . . means concern about being ahead of others or not being left behind by others. As such, its effect in conversation is to cause an apprehensive holding back from talk that presses toward discovering the true state of affairs.¹³

In weaning his interlocutors from self-interested emotions like anger and jealousy, Plato subtly directs them towards the true standard of knowledge in human life: open dialogue guided by *nous*.

Plato, of course, is well aware of the danger and difficulty of open dialogue about the gods. To those who would simply legislate against punishing heretics, the Athenian argues for dispassionate discussion:

Yet it must be dared (*tolmēteon*). For it shouldn't be that both are maddened at the same time, at least, some of us by gluttony for pleasure, and others by spirited anger (*thumousthai*) at such men. Let some such preliminary speech as the following proceed, without spiritedness (*athumos*), for those who are thus corrupted in their thinking, and let's speak gently, quenching spiritedness (*thumos*), as if we were carrying on a dialogue (*dialegomenoi*) with one such man. (888a2-7).

10 At this section of the dialogue, the atheists consider their position to be the "greatest prudence" (*megistē phronēsis*) (886b7-8). This characterization is important, for the atheists believe that by not being taken in by the arguments of the religious they are not only showing intellectual wisdom but also looking out for their own well-being.

11 Robert Mayhew holds that Kleinias, Megillus, and the Athenian have a right to be angry at the atheists (*Plato: Laws 10* : 73). Thomas Pangle argues that *thumos* is an important part of civic life, especially war and punishment. ("The Political Psychology of Religion in Plato's *Laws*," *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 70, 1976 : 1059-1077, here p. 1061."

12 The Political Psychology of Religion in Plato's *Laws*": 1061-1062.

13 *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*: 44-45. While the *Philebus*, the subject of Gadamer's interpretation here, and the *Laws* differ stylistically, they are both typically classified as late works. My analysis here also points to a thematic similarity.

The characterization of the Athenian's dialectical engagement with the atheists as *tolmēros* is fitting, for it is both brave and bordering on the transgressive. While commitment to the principles of open dialogue will loosen the atheist's unthinking commitment to his materialist explanation of the cosmos, Kleinias, Megillus, and the future citizens of Magnesia will be reciprocally exposed to the atheist's arguments. Dialectics are just as much a threat to traditional piety as to atheism.¹⁴

After stating the prerequisites for a true dialogue, the Athenian conjures up a young atheist to engage in dialogue.¹⁵ Far from encouraging the young atheist to quickly change his opinion to a pious one on the basis of some empirical considerations, the Athenian notes the transience of all human opinion and states:

If you should be persuaded by me, you'll wait (*perimeneis*) until you have a doctrine (*dogma*) about these matters that has become as clear as it can be, and meanwhile you'll investigate (*anaskopōn*) whether things are thus or otherwise, and will inquire (*punthanomenos*) from others, and especially the lawgiver. (888c7-d2, cf. 888b2)

The Athenian's recommendation, far from imposing his own theistic dogma on the young atheist, is to *perimenein* and to investigate *para te tōn allōn* (with others). Far from being an exhortation to orthodoxy, this section of the *Laws* advocates *epochē* and shared dialectical inquiry.

Tuchē and Dianoia:

After these methodological exhortations about how to proceed in an open dialogue, the Athenian accords the atheists' argument more respect than before (888d8, cf. 887e8). The Athenian has drawn Kleinias and Megillus into a situation where they must take the atheistic position seriously. The Athenian says, "certain people say that all affairs (*ta pragmata*) come into being, have come into being, and will come into being, by nature (*phusei*), by art (*technēi*), and through chance (*dia tuchēn*)" (888e4-6). In response, Kleinias replies, "Isn't that finely expressed?" Like the young atheist, the old Kleinias is quick to reach an opinion about the greatest matters, but the Athenian replies that they should "investigate (*skepsōmetha*) whatever it is those people over there happen to think (*tugchanousi dianooumenoi*)" (888e7-889a2). In addition to reminding Kleinias, as he did the young atheist, to thoroughly investigate arguments before believing them, this passage foreshadows an important criticism of the atheists' beliefs. Those responsible for the atheistic doctrine happen or chance (*tugchanein*) to think the way they do.

Plato links the atheists' thinking with chance (*tuchē*) in two ways. First, because the atheists hold that random matter in motion precedes soul, thinking itself has to be a product of chance.¹⁶ Second, the atheists' thinking is rooted in chance because it does not engage in open dialogue with opposing viewpoints. Open discussion is the only way of securing knowledge, and

14 See also the use of *dialegomenon* and its close proximity to *philosophein* at 857d2-3; it is characteristic of the *Laws* to note the importance of dialogue and philosophy as goals for human conduct, even though the level of discourse in the *Laws* often fails to enact these standards.

15 Although the young atheists in Book 10 are specific to that book, the Athenian has used the device of a young objector to the legislation elsewhere, compare 839b4.

16 Compare Descartes' *Mediation One*: "According to their supposition [those who deny the existence of god], then, I have arrived at my present state by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events, or by some other means; yet since deception and error seem to be imperfections, the less powerful they make my original cause, the more likely it is that I am so imperfect as to be deceived all the time" (trans. Cottingham, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2006) : 14.

any form of speech which refuses this cannot lay claim to being free from arbitrariness. Both ancestral piety and Presocratic materialism, therefore, are merely arbitrary viewpoints determined by chance until they engage in critical dialogue.¹⁷

By examining Plato's linkage of the *dianoia* of the atheists with *tuchē*, we reach the heart of his criticism of the atheists. Rather than call forward empirical evidence, such as the motion of the stars, to counteract the *logos* of the atheists, the Athenian tries to bring to their attention that on which their *logos* depends: soul. The teaching of the atheists seeks to make a sharp distinction between the works of nature and the works of art (or design) and to accord a greater value on the former than the latter.¹⁸

It's likely, they assert, that the greatest of them, and the finest, are produced (*apergazdesthai*) by nature and chance, and the smaller by art, which taking from nature the genesis of the greatest and first deeds (*ergōn*), molds and constructs all the smaller things which we all call artificial. (889a4-8)

While the atheists ascribe the outcome of natural processes to blind chance, they cannot escape using the soul-dependent language of craft (*apergazdesthai*) and rational agency (*ergōn*).¹⁹

The Priority of the Soul:

After presenting the atheistic teaching, the Athenian proposes that he and Kleinias share in examining it together:

But now you tell me again, Kleinias (for you must share in the arguments (*tōn logōn*)): the one saying these things ventures (*kinduneuei*) to hold that fire, water, earth, and air are the first (*prōta*) of all things, and ventures to name these very things "nature," and to say that soul is something that comes later, out of these things. But it's likely that he doesn't "venture," (*kinduneuein*) but really makes these things manifest (*sēmainein*) to us (*hēmin*) in his argument (*tōi logōi*). (891b8-c5)

The repetition of the verb *kinduneuein* in this passage carries a connotation of riskiness. The atheists' thinking is risky both in that it is determined by *tuchē* and thus proceeds in a haphazard fashion, but also that it is dangerous in its effect on social norms. While the atheists hold that the material elements are first, they nonetheless indicate or signify (*sēmainein*) their thoughts to an audience of living beings, to us (*hēmin*), through a rational discourse. Through engaging this *logos* as well as getting the atheists to recognize it to be a *logos* and therefore dependent on soul will be an important part of the Athenian's argumentation.

After showing that the atheists' opinion rests on their conception of the posteriority of the soul to matter, the Athenian exclaims, "Haven't we discovered something like a source (*pēgēn tina anoētou doxēs*) of the mindless opinion of those human beings who have at any time engaged in investigations into nature?" (891c7-9). The play on "mindless," is derogatory, but it is also explanatory, for the atheists have no way to account for *nous*. Most commentators find the

17 The city of Magnesia is intended to be heavily shaped by persuasive legal preludes and incantations (*epōidē*), but Plato makes clear that habitual virtue is not enough: see Book 12, 951b for the necessity of knowledge of other ways of life and Book 7 816d9-e2 on the necessity of comedy. For a good analysis of the role incantations in the *Laws* see Christoph Helmig, "Die Bedeutung und Funktion von *epōidē* in Platons *Nomoi*," *Plato's Laws: From Theory to Practice*, ed. Scolnicov and Brisson (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2003).

18 In *The Laws of Plato* (University of Manchester Press, 1921), E. B. England suggests that *technē* be translated "design." (on 888e4ff.)

19 Seth Benardete notes well the link between *technē* and knowledge of causality, *Plato's "Laws : The Discovery of Being* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2000) : 297. To the Platonic-Aristotelian way of looking at things, to deny that *technē* is part of nature is to deny that the world can be known.

proof of the priority of the soul in the passage discussing the various kinds of motion (893bff), but the Athenian's prefatory remarks to this proof are more important:

The arguments which have shaped the soul of the impious (*hoi tēn tōn asebōn psukēn apergasamenoī logoi*) have asserted that what is in fact the first cause of the coming into being and passing away of all things is not first, but has come into being later, and that what in fact comes later comes earlier. That is why they have fallen into error concerning the real existence of the gods. (891e4-9)

The impious' *logos* states that soul is something which is fashioned (*apergasamenein*) out of the elements, but the impious are unaware that their soul-denying *logos* shapes, fashions, and resides in their own souls.²⁰ While this argument does not affirm the priority of soul simply,²¹ it does suggest that we should start with the things that are first for us, not the things that are first simply.²² The appropriate starting point for a philosophical understanding of the universe, Plato suggests, is recognition of the fact that those doing the analyzing, human beings, are ensouled beings who come to know the world through *logos*.

Crossing the River:

By getting the atheists to accept the phenomenological priority of soul to body Plato has already gone some way towards his goal of proving the priority of soul. Next, the Athenian Stranger embarks on a methodological digression:

Consider therefore: suppose it was necessary for us, being three, to cross a very swift flowing river, and I, happening (*tugchanōn*) to be the youngest of us and experienced (*empeiros*) in many currents, said that I ought to try it first by myself, leaving you in safety and investigating whether it is fordable for more elderly (*prebuterois*) men such as you, or just how it is . . . [so] first I should question myself, while you listen in safety, and then, after this I again should answer myself, and go through the entire argument this way, until what pertains to soul is completed and it has been demonstrated that soul is prior to body. (892d5-893a7)

On the surface this passage excludes Kleinias and Megillus from active participation in the dialogue.²³ While acknowledging the limitations of Kleinias and Megillus, however, this passage points to what truly counts as the most important qualification for leading a dialogue. Age qualifications are only a result of *tuchē*; what really counts is being experienced (*empeiros*).²⁴ In an argument which is ostensibly devoted to proving that the soul is older than the body, it is both suggestive and ironic that the youngest member of conversation is the most adept at carrying out the proof.

20 England correctly notes that "There is a lurking irony in his choice of the *apergasamenoī* to govern *psuchē*; he thereby calls attention to the absurdity of regarding *psuchē* as a "production" of dead *phusis*." (on 891e7)

21 As Aristotle notes in *Metaphysics Delta* chapter 11, priority admits of a variety of meanings. The *Laws* often seems to conflate temporal priority and phenomenological priority by seeking to draw a link between what is *proteros* and what is *presbuteros*. Gabriela Carone has suggested that *presbuteros* carries connotations of dignity, *Plato's Cosmology and Its Ethical Dimensions* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2005): 165; while this may be true generally, the theme of old age is so prevalent in the *Laws* that I believe Plato uses this term to signify older in time.

22 *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b2-4, *Physics* 184aff.

23 This of course isn't entirely the Athenian's fault, for Megillus at times has shown wariness in submitting to dialectical engagement (cf. 633a1-2).

24 The right of the older to rule the younger is a constant topic under examination throughout the *Laws*. See 690aff where age is only one of the possible titles to rule in contrast to *phronēsis* which is characterized as rule *kata phusin*.

While Kleinias and Megillus do not actively participate in the technical discussion concerning the types of motion, they do consent to the Athenian's leadership in this difficult task. The river of ever-changing human experience is hard to endure,²⁵ and after hours of discussion Kleinias and Megillus willingly allow the Athenian to guide the *logos*.²⁶ The fact that the technical proof of the priority of soul to body proceeds dialogically by means of the Athenian's conversation with himself shows that this form of inquiry remains at the heart of Platonic inquiry, even if Megillus and Kleinias have not progressed far enough to become full-fledged participants.

Which Soul Drives the Cosmos?

After providing arguments which putatively prove the priority of soul to the elements, the Athenian then asks how many souls exist (896e). Answering his own question, the Athenian notes that there are at least two souls. The soul does good, "every time it takes as a helper Intelligence (*noun proslabousa*)—god, in the correct sense, for the gods—it guides all things towards what is happy, while when it associates with lack of intelligence it produces (*apergazdetai*) in all things just the opposite to these" (897b1-5). Here, Plato identifies his true god as *nous*. While the discussion so far has affirmed the existence of souls and *nous*, there is still the question of which soul drives the cosmos.

Now we are at the point where Plato might be tempted to take empirical data into consideration, for the Athenian Stranger states that if the motion of the heavens and the motion of *nous* are similar, then the best soul is in charge of the cosmos. The Athenian asks,

So what nature does the motion of Intelligence (*nous*) possess, then? Now this, friends, is a question that's difficult to answer while speaking in a prudent way. That's why it's just (*dikaion*), at this point, for you to take me (*proslambanein*) as a helper in answering. (897d3-6)

While this passage notes the Athenian's inequality with his interlocutors, the language describing the actions of the interlocutors following the Athenian mirrors the soul's following the commands of *nous*. While much of *Laws 10* is dedicated to providing a *logos* about the existence of *nous*, here the interlocutors' practical actions show in *ergon* that human beings are capable of following *nous* by means of rational discussion and agreement.

The parallel between the soul following *nous* and the interlocutors following the Athenian is followed by a reminder that empirical data is not capable of solving the problems that need to be worked out at the level of self-critical discussion:

Let's not make our reply by looking straight on, and thereby as if we were looking at the sun, create night at midday—because we supposed Intelligence (*nous*) were ever visible and adequately knowable by mortal eyes. One can see in more safety by looking at an image of what is being asked about. (897d8-e2)

In language evoking the *Phaedo* (96c, 99d-100b), the Athenian notes that exclusive concentration on perceptual phenomenon leads to the self-forgetting of the soul.

Instead of focusing on empirical phenomenon, the Athenian "recollects" their earlier distinction between things that move in one place and things that move in many (893bff). The Athenian notes,

Now of these two motions, the one that moves always in one place must necessarily move around some center, being an imitation (*mimēma*) of circular things turned on a

25 Compare *Timaeus* 43a.

26 Compare Aristotle's quotation from Hesiod in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b10-13.

lathe, and it must in every way have the greatest possible kinship and resemblance to the revolution of Intelligence (*nous*). (898a3-6)

This passage, which is to prove crucial in linking the revolution of the stars to the revolution of *nous*, is surprising because the class of things revolving in one place is an *imitation* of the rather ordinary activity of a human being working some piece of wood on a lathe. Whereas one might think that Plato would suggest that human activity be understood in terms of celestial motion or abstract definitions of self-moving motion, this passage interestingly inverts the priority. The abstract concept of circular motion around a fixed point is only intelligible as an imitation of purposive human activity. That this is precisely Plato's point is illustrated by repetition:

Surely, if we said that moving according to what is the same, in the same way, in the same place, around the same things, towards the same things, and according to one proportion (*logon*) and order characterized both Intelligence and the motion that moves in one place—speaking of them as images (*apeikasmēna*) of the motions of a sphere turned on a lathe—we'd never appear to be poor craftsmen (*dēmiourgoi*) of beautiful images in speech (*logōi kalōn eikonōn*). (898a8-b3)

In noting how spherical rotation and the operation of *nous* are similar and can be understood as images of an intelligent craftsman shaping a sphere on a lathe, the Athenian and his interlocutors become *dēmiourgoi* themselves. That the *dēmiourgoi* of the *Laws* are ordinary human beings and not some cosmic creator is significant, especially in light of the opening question of the *Laws*.²⁷ By pointing to how the interlocutors fashion their own rational discourse by analyzing the world around them through the application of reason, Plato suggests the presence of the divine in human rationality.

Only now are we prepared for the “empirical” question of whether or not the heavens are driven around by a rational or irrational soul. Kleinias answers:

But stranger, from what has now been said at any rate, it isn't pious (*hosion*) to say anything other than that the soul—whether it be one or several—that has every virtue drives things around. (898c6-8)

At first glance it is quite surprising, as John Cleary notes, that Kleinias “thinks that an appeal to piety is sufficient to settle the question in favor of a good soul.”²⁸ Isn't there a firmer foundation for the orderliness of the cosmos than this?

Piety and Proof:

In Book 7 of the *Laws* the Athenian outlines the educational system of Magnesia. Examining some of his remarks on the study of astronomy may shed some light on why “piety” is an important component of Platonic cosmology. Here, the Athenian mentions a supposedly pious view which he considers “simply intolerable in every way”:

With regard to the greatest god (*ton megiston theon*), and the cosmos as a whole, we assert that one should not conduct investigations nor busy oneself with trying to discover the causes—for it is not pious (*hosion*) to do so. (820e-821a4)

This claim grounded in false piety is intolerable because human beings' lack of astronomical knowledge combined with their empirical experience of the heavens has led them to think that the cosmos is disorderly and random.²⁹ As Kleinias states,

²⁷ “Is it a god or some human being (*theos ē tis anthrōpōn*), strangers, who is given the credit for laying down your laws?” (624a).

²⁸ John J. Cleary, “The role of theology in Plato's *Laws*”: 132.

For in my lifetime I myself have often seen the Morning Star and the Evening Star, and certain others, never going along the same course, but wandering all over the place; and I suppose we all know that the sun and the moon do these things all the time. (821c1-5)

In addition to standing in contradiction with Kleinias' attempted cosmological-teleological proof at 886d3-e2, this quotation shows that empirical observation of the heavens tells us nothing definite about the existence of *nous* without a proper orientation to the phenomenon under observation.

The Athenian claims in Book 7 that he has a "proof" (*tekmērion*) (821e3) and discusses the possibility of a demonstration of this proof (822b7-9). Unfortunately, however, this proof is not forthcoming. Instead, the Athenian abruptly and surprisingly declares that the laws concerning education have come to an end (822d). While later passages in the *Laws* assert that astronomy has an effect opposite to what the many believe, in that it instills a sense of wonder (*thaumata*) (967a7-d2), these passages do not contain a demonstrative proof of how an intelligent order underlies the sometimes wandering motions of the heavens.

It may be that Plato left out the proof discussed in Book 7 simply because its complexity was too great for the legislative-minded audience of the *Laws*. It seems to me, however, that Plato omits this proof either because he believes that the existence of *nous* does not need to rely on a highly complex technical proof or because he thinks that the existence of *nous* is not strictly demonstrable in this manner. Instead Plato relies on the sense of wonder that one experiences when contemplating the cosmos with an open mind (compare in this regard 893d3) and the existential possibility of *nous* coming to guide human conversation as it does over the course of the *Laws*. Openness to *nous*' operation in the heavens and in conversation is not, strictly speaking, a *logos*. Instead it is a fundamental orientation to the world which in Plato's view falls under the name of piety. In this way Plato suggests that piety has, for human beings, an existential priority to logical proof.

Whether Plato thought that piety, understood as affirming the phenomenological priority of the soul and being open to the existential possibility of *nous* arising in dialogical conversation, is enough to establish a coherent theology for Magnesia is an open question. Plato's political theology draws on a great deal more than this, including religious tradition, political necessity, and perhaps empirical observations that were discussed in more detail in the Academy. It seems to me, however, that the inherent orientation of open human dialogue towards *nous*, and not any empirical observations, form the essential starting point from which any coherent elaboration of Platonic theology must proceed.

²⁹ Compare Aristophanes' *Clouds* 607ff. for a comic account of how inaccurate astronomy leads to religious impieties.