

Kostas Papaioannou

NATURE AND HISTORY IN THE
GREEK CONCEPTION OF THE COSMOS

To Maurice de Gondillac

Nature and history are for us two diametrically opposed possibilities of organization, knowledge, interpretation, and evaluation of the reality around us. Since the Renaissance, the world can no longer be thought of as a structured and coherent whole, and its meaning always remains partial. The world bears within it a duality which nothing can surmount: Nature and mind represent the two poles of a reality which Jean Mair described as early as the end of the fifteenth century as *non facientia unum*. The being of Nature consists henceforth in being an *object* of representation, of scientific knowledge, and of technical exploitation. The being of man consists in placing himself as *subject* opposite the world, which is conceived as an object essentially foreign to man, "mute" in what concerns his ultimate destination. Up to that time,

Translated by Wells S. Chamberlin.

I

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

man knew himself by referring to an “objective,” undiscussed world; existence could be constantly shaken by the deepest terrors, but it was not problematical: man knew his natural place in a world ordered by a sovereign reason. Now with the destruction of the theophanic universe, it was not only man’s place in the world which became problematical but the very idea of the universe; the experience of the living totality of the world was progressively drained of its substance. The new “situation of man in the world” is that of a being savagely freed of everything, profoundly isolated in the midst of an infinitely open world in which the global has less and less meaning and in which it is no longer a question of participating in being but of doing and of having. Rimbaud’s remark, “We are not in the world,” began to be true; incapable of finding his support in the universe, placing all his pride in seeking his truth within himself, man then turned to history to ask of it those answers which the former wisdom, the former *Weltweisheit*, or revelation could no longer give him. In the “ocean of Cartesian doubt” Vico saw history as the only *firmum et mansurum* to which man could lay claim. As the work of a freedom progressively creating its own content for itself, as a return to itself of the mind lost or “alienated” in matter, history was becoming the only humanly possible way of conceiving the “natural” place of man in the world, the sole encompassing (περιέχων) totality still capable of serving as a horizon for his triumphant self-certainty, the only *world* still conceivable after the suppression of transcendency and the loss of presence. According to Marx’ profound observation, history had the mission, “once the *thither* side of truth had vanished, to establish the truth of the *hither* side.”¹ To the “dead” or “hidden” God and to “mute” or inaudible Nature, man opposed this derisory fragment of time which he had succeeded in making his and from which he hoped to derive at once the truth of his being and the norm of his action.

To seize upon Nature as *décor*, upon matter as material, upon history as substance, in sum, to take the absolute as subject, is perhaps the experience of modern times which has seemed the most evident, the most “natural.” Now at the moment when a most subtle skepticism, precisely that which was secreted by the very idea of history, is beginning to gnaw at the bases of the archeological edifice of which man has tried to

1. Karl Marx, “Critique de la philosophie hégélienne du droit,” in *Die Frühschriften*, ed. Kröner (1953), pp. 208–9; trans. H. J. Stenning, *Selected Essays by Karl Marx* (New York: International Publications, 1946), p. 13.

make his sole abode, it would be, we believe, not without interest to “relativize” our historical awareness, to compare first of all our historical conception of the world with the spiritual experience of other cultures. The world without history in which the Greeks lodged their gods, their fears, and their questions will perhaps show us some guide lines for this *Critique of Historical Reason*.

I. THE IDEA OF THE COSMOS

In the modern view the image of the universe and the conception that one must make of man and of his dignity are rigorously distinct, the situation of man being that of a subject detached from the universe, opposed to the object, and mastering Nature. Now, in the Greek view of the cosmos, this modern claim to a sphere of autonomy which is proper to man, and the essential dualism between the natural order and the world of freedom which it postulates, would not fail to appear completely illegitimate. Greek thought, entirely regulated by the idea of Nature and of geometric cosmos, never was able, or rather never sought, to develop a “philosophy” of history in the modern sense of the term. If the Greeks were the first who elevated history to the dignity of a science, their humanism, basically “cosmic” (in the Greek sense of the term), found it repugnant to consider in and for itself this reign of the human arbitrary, “escaped” from Nature, “emancipated” from Nature. Any authentic philosophy of history is first and foremost a “metaphysics” or a “supraphysics” in the sense that it confers primacy upon historical time over natural space and sees in the historical event the realization of a value and the accomplishment of a principle of salvation which are different from those which we can seek and discover in the immutable order of Nature. A philosophy of this kind, with the rigid oppositions which it implies between Nature and mind, between objectivity and subjectivity, between necessity and freedom, as well as the value emphasis which it places on all the generative activities of history, runs counter to the deepest aspirations of the Greek mind, as we see them appear through the fundamental concept of cosmos.

Christianity turned values inward and rooted the mind in the depths of subjectivity. It was thus that Descartes, who had begun by doubting the reality of all that which appears as simple and knowable, stopped at the “I think; I am.” It was the discovery of the *cogito* which permitted him to compare himself to Archimedes, who, “that he might transfer the entire globe from the place it occupied to another, demanded only a

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

point that was firm and unmovable.”² On the contrary, the Greeks sought the mind in the direction of the “object”; they could doubt everything save the reality and the rationality of the objective world. Therefore the mind was discovered “objectively” in the natural world as the principle of its order, its beauty, and its motion.

The universe, which has had no beginning and which will have no end, represented for the Greek mind what its most intimate needs demanded and what both the political search for a human order “in conformity with Nature” and the philosophic search for a science based on concepts already seemed to imply as their model and their object. The universe is an order, a *cosmos*, which, in a perfect, harmonious, finite totality, orders the infinity of forms of the possible to which *physis*, eternal motion of procreation, gives reality. And this cosmos which “no God created” is “the same for all”:³ it imposes itself in a single and identical way upon all the beings who coexist in the midst of the universe, whether they are divine or human: *κόσμος δ' αὐτὸς ἀπάντων*.

Cosmos is order—a reasonable, harmonious order, generator of *just* relationships in the motions of the stellar bodies or in the vibrations of the metallic strings. This term, as we know, was clothed in a host of meanings the enumeration of which would alone suffice to show the Greek’s will to let the world impose itself as limits to be recognized and as an interior law. And, consequently, cosmos means at the same time “adornment”⁴ and all “splendor” in general;⁵ universe or totality of beings and political constitution founded upon law;⁶ principle of order and of harmony which regulates the relationships among particular beings as well as among the elements of each being;⁷ “virtue”⁸ or “good,” which are immanent in each being and which permit it to become what it is and to maintain itself as it is.

Consequently, we understand the total character of this search: knowledge and recognition of the cosmos as a forming and lawmaking

2. In the second *Meditation*, trans. John Veitch (London: Dent, 1912), p. 85.

3. Heraclitus Frag. 30 (Diels).

4. Plato *Menexenus* 236e; Sophocles *Ajax* l. 293; etc.

5. Cf. Aeschylus *Agamemnon* l. 356: *Νύξφιλία, μεγάλων κόσμων κτεάτειρα*. Trans. Herbert Weir Smith (“Loeb Classics” [New York: Putnam, 1926]), II, 33: “. . . kindly Night, that has given us great glory for our possession.”

6. Cf. Herodotus i. 65; Euripides *Suppliant Maidens* 245; Plato *Laws* 846d.

7. Whether a house or a body (Plato *Gorgias* 504a) or a city (*Laws* 734a, 741a).

8. Cf. the fundamental analyses of Plato in *Gorgias* 504d.

whole. This is the soul of the humanism of antiquity. This cosmos whose sovereignty can be measured only by the vastness of the forces it masters is for the Greeks that by which all existence becomes possible. What their humanism affirmed was not the victory of the terrestrial over that which goes beyond it but the *κοσμίτης* of the intelligent soul which has recognized the universal law as its own law and whose internal discipline is in accord with the order of all that is. Their passivity as men entirely submissive to the law stems from the highest action, since comprehension of the order and beauty of the universe implies the creation of harmonious works in all the areas of the inferior terrestrial world in which human faculties are called upon to operate and presupposes the constitution of that internal harmony (*κοσμίτης*) which is like the reflection of that which reigns in heaven.

The deepest intuitions of the Greeks concerning the nature of the divine and concerning the condition of man were expressed within the framework, spatial as it were, which was provided by the opposition between the celestial cosmos and the human world. It is therefore fitting to say a few words about the manner in which the Greeks represented the existing relationships between the divine world and the human world.

II. DIVINE "THEORIA" AND HUMAN EXISTENCE

The Zeus of Homer and Hesiod bears no resemblance to a creator or to a redeemer. *Physis*, or the motion of procreation, is defined precisely by its capacity for self-development and thus excludes any intervention by a creator. Although Zeus has appropriated sovereignty over the universe, his authority has no regenerative power and, moreover, does not contest the rights acquired by the pre-Olympian forces such as Hecate or the terrible children of Night and of Strife. In the same way, beside the civilizing gods such as Apollo and Athena, other gods, representing the sanctity of the original savagery (Pan) or that of the violent abolition of all historically established order (Dionysus), are present to remind us of the irreducible multiplicity of the natural life. In a general way, what is important for the Greek is neither to become nor to owe, neither to be able nor to will; it is to be. Therefore what Zeus asks of his gods is not to act or to intervene on his behalf but only to "be," that is, to guarantee by the perfection and the beauty of their figures those "pure" forms of life which man can never possess wholly and which are always in danger of being dissolved in the world below.

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

Philosophy and poetry could spiritualize the content of the popular religion, but there was never any question of attributing to the divine an ethical or "historical" action. "The gods as we conceive them," says Aristotle, "enjoy supreme felicity and happiness."⁹ But how can we conceive their happiness? The value of an action or of a thought, that is, the "happiness" (*εὐδαιμονία*) which it can procure, depends solely upon its object. Now the highest object to which any being may attach itself is the eternal cosmos, and contemplation of that cosmos is the only activity which we must attribute to the gods, for it would be lowering their dignity to recognize their lives as moral ones; in general, "all forms of virtuous conduct seem trifling and unworthy of the gods." And it is precisely because their activity is an uninterrupted contemplation of the immutable and imperishable cosmos that their lives are spent in a "perfect happiness." This contemplative life, the *theoria*, reveals the essential affinity of the divine and the human. For, aside from man, all living beings "cannot partake of happiness, because they are completely devoid of the contemplative activity."¹⁰ It is only the continuous or momentary character of this contemplation which makes human existence different.¹¹

Thus that "power" (*δύναμις*) which, in the great poem of Pindar,¹² separates the race of the gods and the race of men reverts in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and in Plato's *Phaedrus* to the capacity for *theoria*. All authentic existence, divine or human, proceeds from contemplation and ends in contemplation. Above the gods is the divinity of being, and it is to the contemplation of the intelligible reality that the gods owe their divinity.¹³ If the soul is relatively capable of introducing a certain harmony into its motions and of working in such a way that human life is not a disorder but a cosmos, this is because it has been able to contemplate the non-temporal Being from which the gods derive their substance.¹⁴ In divine nature, however, the conditions of the contemplation are combined in a perfect way. In other terms, the constituting of an

9. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1178b. 8, 22. Trans. H. Rackham ("Loeb Classics" [New York: Putnam, 1926]), p. 623.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1072b. 14, 16.

12. *Nemea* vi. 1, 13.

13. Plato *Phaedrus* 249c.

14. *Ibid.* 247c, d.

internal harmony and of a perfect collaboration among the diverse faculties of the soul is the condition for the knowledge of the harmonies and the revolutions of the universe, and it requires, as it would in the case of three strings giving off a low, a high, and a middle note, that the soul harmonize the three factors which constitute it.¹⁵ But the human soul is only relatively capable of such harmony—whence the imperfect character of its contemplation and its motion.

This uninterrupted contemplative life, which is the substance of divine life, thus goes beyond human possibilities; but, Aristotle will say, man must not heed that wisdom of resignation which tells us that, since we are men, we must limit our thought to the things of men (*ἀνθρώπινα φρονεῖν*). On the contrary, man must, as far as possible, “attach himself to that which is immortal (*ἀθανατίζειν*)”¹⁶ by directing his thought toward those very objects, perfect and immortal, which the divine intelligence contemplates. Therefore, in the hierarchy of virtues established by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, human things—art and its works, as well as that “practical wisdom” which teaches us which are the things “good for man”—are all subordinated to “theoretical” wisdom; their inferiority consists in the fact that their object, man and the “good of man,” in general, all that has to do with man, is *essentially inferior* to the objects of contemplation, which are eternal and perfectly ordered objects such as the heavenly bodies.

Here we are far from that pretended anthropocentrism which the Renaissance thought it discovered in Greek thought. This lesson in humility presupposes, moreover, a rather pessimistic conception of the place of man in the world: if man is similar to divinity by the “greatness of his mind,”¹⁷ the human world such as it immediately appears, such as it is in itself, is farthest removed from divine perfection.

III. THE SITUATION OF THE HUMAN WORLD IN REFERENCE TO THE COSMOS

Indeed, if the divine possesses the character of “Supreme Good,” this is only because of its perfection, which makes it infinitely desirable. And it is solely as an object of the universal Eros (*ὡς ἐρώμενον*) that the divine “acts” in heaven and in Nature. Order, harmony, justice, measure, and beauty serve in turn, according to Plato, to define or to

15. Cf. Plato *Republic* 433c ff.

16. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177a. 12, 1178a. 8.

17. Pindar *loc. cit.*

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

express this Good toward which tends all that which, in the human world, aspires to give itself a form and a durable structure and all that which, in the higher world, serves as a model for the ephemeral and partial effort of men. This Good is an absolute end, since it is at once an order constituting all works and all reality and a finished expression of all works and all constituted reality. It is therefore efficient in the highest degree, since for Plato, as for Aristotle, the only end is properly efficient; consequently, it is that Good which all positive work seeks to realize, whether the work is that of the divine artisan of the *Timaieus* (29a, d) that of the painter, the architect, the doctor, and the gymnast in the *Gorgias* (503–4), or that of the weaver who furnishes the model for the royal man in the *Politics* (279a).

All that which is done in the world “is,” therefore, by virtue of the positive terminal point toward which it moves or in which it comes to completion. If divinity is the *end* which confers a meaning upon the total becoming of the world, this is because of the erotic attraction which it exercises; in seeking the order to be realized and the perfection to be attained, particular beings obey the universal Eros whose divine perfection is the ultimate object.

God is the *direct* object of the Eros of natural eternal beings—that is, of the celestial spheres. The latter “imitate” the perfect life of the divine by accomplishing the only physical motion which is perfect and eternal—circular motion. The vault of heaven is the least imperfect expression of the intelligible reality. Indeed, the most perfect is that which is the least subject to change, to generation, and to corruption, and the more perfect the being, the less great is the proportion of chance and arbitrariness in its motion. The celestial bodies are the only ones which are not subject to generation or to corruption, to changes in quality or in dimension; therefore, in contrast to “imperfect and perishable” rectilinear motion, which reigns in the sublunar world where beings are subject to the vicissitudes of generation and corruption, their “perfect and eternal”¹⁸ circular motion obeys a perfect necessity and reveals in the order of the visible that supreme Good toward which tends all divine or human existence which aspires to the plenitude of Being. In brief, *the Good which acts in the universe remains precarious in the here-below and shows itself as really efficacious only in the cosmic domain*, from which, moreover, all the phenomena of our inferior world derive their content of reality, beauty, and value.

18. Aristotle *Physics* 265a.

As it is revealed in its circular progress, the world is eternal. It can have no goal; it can only be. All power is gathered within it, and it is by becoming aware of his quality of belonging to the cosmos that man can develop the divinity he has within him. The refusal to set extraordinary value upon the artificial works of man, the refusal to grant a fundamental importance to the world created by history, results from this religious veneration of the cosmos. It also results, and more importantly, from the properly tragic way in which the Greeks interpreted the contrast which opposes cosmos, the beautiful orderliness which rules in the world of space, and the *ἀκοσμία* (“disorder”) inherent in the terrestrial world.

In Plato this opposition serves constantly to give body to the essential difference which separates the divine *theoria* from human contemplation; more precisely, it shows the opposition of Being and of appearance as an opposition of pure knowledge, from which objects spring into being, perish, and change ceaselessly. The parallelism established by the myth of the *Phaedrus* (246–51) between the circular motion of the cosmos and the exercise of pure thought shows quite clearly all the symbolic import of the spatial relationship between the celestial revolutions and pure Ideas. But we must take care not to believe that a purely gnoseological contrast is involved here. A passage from the *Timaeus* (47b, c) in which human disorder is opposed to the “celestial motions which know no disturbance” already shows us the more general sense which the Greeks gave to this contrast. Indeed, in looking upon the beautiful regularity shown by cosmic motions, and without which the world would immediately revert to the chaotic matter which remains coeternal with it, the Greek feels himself surrounded by fearsome powers which constantly struggle to erupt in order to bring back that primitive disorder, that absence of rule and of form, which characterized the primitive state. Sublime geometry, to which the motions of the celestial bodies conform, so operates that these perfect and ordered beings “never violate Justice in their mutual relationships.”¹⁹ On the other hand, *eris*, *hybris*, *adikīa*, *anomia*, and *pleonexia* are the invisible and perpetual actors of the human drama: man risks at every moment becoming the prey of these demoniacal forces which drive beings to violate the legitimacy of their reciprocal relationships, to transgress the limits assigned them by the order of the cosmos, and to menace thereby the very foundation of Being.

19. *Republic* 500c.

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

We have just spoken of Justice (*Δίκη*). The idea of cosmos is inseparable from that of Justice, of which Logos is the essence: just as the word “cosmos” is applicable both to the entire universe and to a well-constituted state, so we see *Dike* projected from the society it must regulate into the universe whose unity and cohesion it assures.

IV. “JUSTICE” AND COSMOS

When the Greeks discovered the rational regularity and the harmonious whole formed by the relationships and the motions of the universe, the perfection of this cosmic order inspired in them a religious veneration and a contemplative beatitude. Having made this discovery at a decisive period in their history, at the very moment when they were emerging from an era of revolutionary upheavals and were inaugurating a civil order based upon democratic law (*ισονομία*), they saw in the order and beauty of the universe the manifestation, not of a simple causal necessity, but of a divine Justice of which the vast constructive and destructive force is the *conjunction* of opposed powers and which is therefore the condition for the permanence of the universe.

This Justice was placed in the center of the cosmos as the power directing and maintaining it and to which everything owes obedience “in the same way,” says Heraclitus, “as the city owes obedience to the law” (Frag. 114). Justice is like life: she saves what can be saved and destroys that which is perishable.²⁰ It is she who conserves the existing world, for it is from her that flow “law and order, the bearers of limit.”²¹ As keeper of the eternal laws, she imposes the limits which the sun cannot cross.²² Her work is “divine,” at the same time “salutary” for some and destructive for others.²³ She is “salutary” because it is solely within the limits imposed by her that every action, every nature, and every existence finds the Logos, the reason, the necessity, and the justification of its being. She is “destructive” because to abandon her is to question that by which the boundless and the multiple acquire form and unity; to transgress the limits assigned by the order of the cosmos is to disarticulate one’s self, to expose one’s self to the fatality of annihilation.

20. The classical definition of law; cf., e.g., Plato *Laws* 683b; Aristotle *Politics* 1289^B. 25; *Nicomachean Ethics in fine*.

21. Plato *Philebus* 26b.

22. Heraclitus Frag. 94.

23. Plato *Philebus* 26b.

This Justice, which creates and which destroys and which is at the same time the fermenting agent of relationships which nothing can stabilize, was prophetically announced in fear and trembling as the terrifying power of Destiny which protects Being from those who exist. To become aware of the inviolate character of Being in and through the experience of annihilation, to accept that fatality of destruction and to recognize in it "justice" as the condition for all existence, this is the *πάθει μάθος* ("wisdom learned through suffering"),²⁴ the lesson of tragedy. In fact, the cosmos appeared to the mind as a supreme good of which the possession is always remote, like a requirement not yet fulfilled and which manifests itself much more as a threat of destruction than as a positive presence. And communion with this Justice was not yet the peaceful Platonic *σωφροσύνη* but what the Greek prophets from Heraclitus to Aeschylus called *φρονεῖν*; that state of extreme tension in which man goes beyond his own terrors in order to consent to this "beneficent violence of the gods" (*χάρις Βίατος*), who heap up catastrophes so that men may escape "despite themselves" from the senseless tumult of which they are the authors and the victims.²⁵

We see appearing here that tragic feeling about life which underlies the Apollonian ideal of the cosmos. The soul must take the cosmos as its model because, of all the beings which Justice brings into collaboration in the perfection of the universe, man is by far the most disturbing. He alone is able to contemplate the order and the harmony which reign in the cosmos, and in this sense he is a "celestial creature," an *οὐράνιον φυτόν*,²⁶ capable of deepening and developing his quality of belonging to the cosmos. But at the same time, of all the beings which populate the imperfect world of sublunar space, man is the most inclined to stray from his principle, to move from his center, to contest the universal law by which all forces are maintained in a divine equilibrium.

V. COSMIC JUSTICE AND THE CONDITION OF MAN

For the Greeks it is by what is most terrible (*δεινός*) in man that his condition is most expressly manifested. This term *deinos*, so difficult to translate, suggests the maleficent and the admirable, the frightening

24. Aeschylus *Agamemnon* l. 177, trans. Smith, *op. cit.*, II, 19.

25. *Ibid.* ll. 180–82.

26. Pato *Timaeus* 90a.

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

and the imposing in every being which, through the power it contains within it, goes beyond just measure. And it is precisely this disturbing element in man which Sophocles wishes to point out in the *Antigone*:

Πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδεν ἄν—
Θρώπου δεινότερον πέλει

This famous song does not merely mean “many wonders there be, but naught more wondrous than man.” In its concern for emphasizing all that exalts man and weakens destiny, the traditional humanist translation destroys the fundamental ambiguity of the term *deinos*. To get the true meaning as well as the *historical* import of this hymn to man, we must understand it as an *answer* to the chorus of the *Libation Bearers* (ll. 590 ff.):

πολλὰ μὲν γὰ τρέφει
δεινὰ δειμάτων ἄχη

“Full many,” says Aeschylus, “are the horrors, dread and appalling, bred of earth. . . . But of man’s spirit overbold who can tell.” Sophocles, it is true, sees man detaching himself from this terrifying background. The vast grandeur of his being is also revealed in his capacity for mastering the natural elements and in the possibility which is given him to draw from his own resources the means to found and to justify his own reality. But for Sophocles, as for Aeschylus, man remains *deinos* by the vastness of his will,²⁷ by *hybris* which drives him to endanger the whole of the relationships constituting the cosmos proper to him.

To see this cosmos, which is the condition for all being and for all reality, challenged by the arbitrary and limitless qualities of willing, which, hypostatized, can strike like lightning each one without distinction, the noble and pure Eteocles and the wise Oedipus, the savior of his country, was for the Greek the supreme fear. What mattered to him was not the internal necessity of the action or the personal characteristics of the man but solely the problem of right which all human action poses. This explains that extraordinary dejection of the individual before the reality of Evil and the still stronger reality of justice-giving Destiny. Therefore tragedy will place in opposition not characters whose secret intentions have no common measure but different rights, originally equally respectable. The tragic arises because man does not know

27. ὑπέρολμον φρόνημα: *Libation Bearers* l. 595, trans. Smith, *op. cit.*, II, 219; τόλμας χάριν: *Antigone* l. 372.

how to retain his right and always wishes for more than his right. The intensity of the tragic is measured, not by the depth of the intention or by the progressive revelation of the irreducible personal forces whose domination precipitates men into error and crime, but rather by the fact that Right, which makes existence legitimate, “emigrates” (*μεταβαίνει*), and by the fact that “all is completed in the direction which Right takes.”²⁸ Thus the man abandoned by Right witnesses, powerless, his own destruction, and the cosmos “extinguishes the *hybris* as one extinguishes a fire”²⁹ in order to re-establish itself in its pure and non-temporal presence. To see equilibrium regained, to feel that, beyond the destructive follies and the terrors of willing, the eternal cosmos remains as an unshakable foundation—this is the *cátharsis*.

And now we can guess the source from which tragedy draws that “sacred power” which Plato envied in it.³⁰ To encourage man to aspire with all his might to the cosmos and to Justice, the Greeks knew no greater stimulant than the theatrical reminder of the primitive disorder from which he rose to existence and which he will never succeed in eliminating completely, since it constitutes his share of necessary inheritance. Man, who recognized his own demons in the unfolding of cruelties and massacres offered him by tragedy, had to struggle to guard against the exaggerated will of which he knew himself possessed, by venerating the god of Justice, who “from their high-towering hopes . . . hurleth mankind to utter destruction.”³¹

This high tower of hope is the one of which Pindar speaks when he asks:

Whether by justice or by crooked wiles
The race of men on earth mounteth to a higher
point of vantage
My mind is divided as to the truth to tell.³²

Here we must think not of the “great desire for excellence” which evoked in Dante a strange and deep envy,³³ but of the prophetic proc-

28. *Libation Bearers* ll. 306–8.

29. Heraclitus Frag. 41.

30. *Gorgias* 502b. Cf. also *Laws* 817b, c.

31. Aechylus *Suppliant Maidens* l. 95, trans. Smith, *op. cit.*, II, 11.

32. Frag. 213 (Schröder), trans. Lewis Richard Farnell (London: Macmillan & Co., 1930), pp. 347–48.

33. *Purgatory* xi. 85: “*gran disio dell'eccellenza*.”

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

lamentation of Justice, as we find it in Isaiah:

For the Lord of hosts has a day
against all that is proud and lofty (*ἐπι πάντα ὑβριστήν*)
against all that is lifted up and high. . . .
against every high tower,
and against every fortified wall. . . .
And the pride of men shall be brought low;
And the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.³⁴

In their conception of Justice the Greek poets and philosophers show themselves to be closely akin to the Jewish prophets. Just as the prophet appears when the Levite fails to appear, in order to re-establish the alliance between God and his people, in Greece, tragedy and philosophy take upon themselves the task of expressing or of restoring the bond which unites the polis to the cosmos. But it is here that a fundamental difference comes to light. The importance granted by Jewish prophetism to Justice derives from the fact that it is linked to an eschatological perspective and that it allows history to be victorious over Nature. But the “clairvoyance” which for the Hebrew produces prophecy, in Greece produces contemplation of non-temporal essences; criticism of injustice is founded in Greece not upon the vision of a Day of Wrath historically placed and upon the imminence of the eschatological Nothing but upon the contemplation of the Good, that is to say, of what is most striking and manifest (*φανότατον*), most blissful and most excellent in Being.³⁵ Justice as re-establishment of the privileged bond which allies God and the chosen people produces in Israel the opposite of politics and tends to make of the Jewish people a church or a “nation of priests.” Conceived on the model of geometric proportion, Justice appears in Greece as an inclusion of the civic order in the eternal order of the cosmos, which alone can permit man to free himself from “antique sin”³⁶ and aspire to Being. Therefore the proclamation of the sovereign power of Justice which “does not loose its chains and allows nothing to be born or to disappear, but which maintains firmly that which is”³⁷ brings out forcefully the intimate bond which in Greece unites the philosopher and the lawmaker.

34. Isa. 2 : 12–15.

35. Plato *Republic* 518c, 532c, 526e.

36. Aeschylus *Agamemnon* l. 1197. (cf. trans. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 103: “Deeds of sin, ancient in story.”)

37. Parmenides 8. 13–15.

VI. TRAGIC WISDOM AND POLITICAL VIRTUE

Solon, the purest exponent of pre-Socratic prophetism, shows for the first time the new solidarity which is to unite individuals and the law. For Solon, Delphic wisdom speaks the language of tragedy:

It is the townsfolk themselves and their false-hearted leaders who would fain destroy our great city through wantonness and love of money. . . . Public calamity cometh to the house of every individual, and a man is no longer safe within the gates of his own court, which refuse him their protection. It leapeth over the garden-wall, however high it be, and surely findeth him out, though he run and hide himself in the inmost corner of his chamber.³⁸

Only the law dictated by Justice can combine harmoniously the rights of all; only the law can found freedom without which there is no right: she is the salutary good which "smooths out the roughnesses, represses the excesses, extinguishes the flame of *hybris*, withers the flowers of folly, straightens twisted judgments, softens acts of violence, puts an end to the discords and the rancor of bitter quarrels."

Originally the vengeance of the weak united against the strong, Justice ceased with Solon to represent a simple combination of balance between opposing parties, in order to designate a reality above parties and to express a well for order and unity fighting against a principle of violence and dispersion. Identical with the very movement of life, Justice is henceforth the law which one cannot deny without renouncing life. That is why the Greeks recoiled prudently from any attempt to disassociate the freedom which they had just won and the law which had made it possible. "For though they be freemen," said Herodotus (vii. 104), "they are not in all respects free"; the law was the "master" (*δεσπότης*) which they recognized over them, and they were more obedient to it "than the subjects of the Great King" to him. Aristotle will go much further. It is, he says, through submission to the law and through the "pre-established" ordered character of its action that the free man is distinguished from the slave and from the animal.³⁹ Aristotle had, it is true, a particular reason for insisting upon this dependence of the free man in reference to the law upon which his freedom is founded. The polis of his day had deviated from its principle; the reign of the demagogues had been substituted for that of the laws "without

38. Frag. 12, ll. 17 ff., trans. Ivan M. Linforth (*Solon the Athenian* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1919]), pp. 140-41.

39. *Metaphysics* 1075a. 19.

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

which there is no *politeia*.”⁴⁰ By differentiating these two types of democracy, Aristotle transposed to the field of politics in a profoundly significant way the Platonistic distinction between *logos* and *doxa*: to the man of *logos* corresponds the citizen of the “democracy founded upon the law” in which “there are no demagogues,” and to the man of *doxa* corresponds the “tyrannical” citizen of the “democracy in which decrees reign,” in which all is subject to subjective evaluation. In the first type of democracy the thought of the citizens is directed toward the stable and durable, that is, toward the law which alone can make them capable of organizing themselves inwardly and of affirming themselves as a political body endowed with a real and efficacious will. On the other hand, the substitution of decrees for laws presupposes the dissolution of the internal bond which unified the mass and implies the omnipotence of the demagogues. Democracy is drained of its content when the citizens are incapable of seeking any goal other than that which shows through the changing attitudes of the moment.⁴¹

The possibility of such a “degeneration” of a democracy did not become evident until moral optimism had repressed the tragic feeling of Justice, on which classical democracy was founded. As long as men’s minds still retained the memory—perpetuated by tragedy—of a still not too distant time when “the flowers of folly were blooming,” it could hardly be a question for the individual to challenge (or to feel himself above) that which guaranteed the fragile order which he knew was threatened on all sides.⁴² For Aeschylus, who lived in a world in which “antique titanic Nature” still made itself felt in immediate life, only the sacred terror inspired by Justice could master the centrifugal forces which threatened the order of the city. Only a stronger terror can strangle the *deinon* which is incarnate in man:

Times there are when fear is well and should abide enthroned as guardian of the heart. . . . But who that traineth not his heart in fear, be it State or be it man, is like in the future to reverence justice as heretofore? . . . Neither anarchy nor tyranny—this I counsel my burghers to maintain and hold in reverence, nor quite to banish fear from out the city. For who among mortal men is righteous that hath no fear of aught?⁴³

The historical work accomplished by Sophocles’ generation saved

40. *Politics* 1292a.

41. Aristotle *Athenian Republic* xxviii. 4: *παραιτία*.

42. Plato *Laws* 701c.

43. Aeschylus *Eumenides* ll. 516–24 and 696–99, trans. Smith, *op. cit.*, II, 321 and 339.

him from such an excessive emphasis upon the pitiless rigor of destiny. When the world was cleansed of the “antique sin,” it became possible to face it with less fear and to see in it the calm reflection of the salutary Good.

VII. KNOWLEDGE AND SALVATION

Thus, for example, the tragic vision of human error is almost transcended in Sophocles by the more calming certainty that the order of the cosmos can truly be a model for the soul. Through contemplation of the effective order existing in the universe, man will be able to find in it the organizing and supreme moderating power which will permit him to “maintain himself in the bonds of Justice” and consequently to persevere in being. Such is already the sense of the words of Ajax, where again it is a question of the *deina*:⁴⁴

καὶ γὰρ τὰ δεινὰ καὶ τὰ καρτερώτατα

Dread potencies and powers
 Submit to law. Thus winter snow bestrown
 Gives place to opulent summer. Night's dim orb
 Is put to flight when Dawn with her white steeds
 Kindles the day-beams; and the wind's fierce breath
 Can lay the storm and lull the moaning deep.
 E'en thus all-conquering sleep holds not for ever
 Whom he has bound, and must relax his grasp.
 And we, shall we not likewise learn to yield?

The *σωφρονεῖν* which, for Aeschylus, could be learned only “under constraint and suffering”⁴⁵ can henceforth be acquired by the contemplation of a cosmos which has ceased to be fatality in order to become harmony. For this world overflowing with beauty and power, ordered by that divine law which “nourishes all human laws,”⁴⁶ can communicate only wisdom to us. To contemplate it is to admit it and to deepen our affinity with the beautiful rationality which lies in the heart of the “objective” being; therefore, to adhere to it and to make one’s self similar to it as far as possible, according to the principle: “that he who contemplates shall make himself similar to the object of his contemplation.”⁴⁷

44. *Ajax* ll. 669–77, trans. F. Storr (“Loeb Classics” [New York: Macmillan Co., 1913]), II, 59.

45. Aeschylus *Eumenides* ll. 519–20: *Ἔμφερει σωφρονεῖν ὑπὸ στένει*.

46. Heraclitus Frag. 114.

47. Pato *Timaeus* 90d.

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

Here we see in what consists the “salutary” character of knowledge. “To save” (σώζειν) means for the Greeks “to conserve,” “to maintain,” and the “salvation” brought by knowledge is of the same order as the element of stabilization which mathematical science introduces into the world of phenomena. Knowledge “saves,” that is, it allows man to imprint the mark of being upon becoming and consequently to maintain himself as a form in the becoming, just as mathematical interpretation of the motion of the planets “saves,” according to Plato, the appearances which this motion presents. The salutary virtue of knowledge therefore has its source in the very nature of its object:

The man whose mind is truly fixed on eternal realities . . . fixes his gaze upon the things of the eternal and unchanging order, and seeing that they neither wrong nor are wronged by one another, but all abide in harmony as reason bids, he will endeavour to imitate them, and as far as may be, to fashion himself in their likeness and assimilate himself to them . . . do you think it possible not to imitate the things to which anyone attaches himself with admiration? . . . Then the lover of wisdom associating with the divine order will himself become orderly and divine in the measure permitted to man.⁴⁸

A principle which is not only intelligence but also value is, then, the common truth of physical order and of human order. When the cosmos is present in a body, declares Plato in the *Gorgias* (504*b, d*), then there is “health and strength.” In the same way, the presence of the cosmos in the soul is political virtue and wisdom: “order and cosmos constitute by their presence the discipline and the law which make the good citizen and the temperate man.”

It is in this dialogue, which treats of the impossibility which might be called ontological, of the will to power, that we find expressed, with a Thucydidean density which defies all translation, the idea so characteristic of the Greek mind—the idea of the identity of the cosmos, of the “good,” of knowledge, and of “virtue.” In general, says Socrates to the Nietzschean Callicles

the virtue of each thing, whether instrument, or body, or soul, and moreover of every animal, does not reach a high pitch of perfection by chance, but by order, and rectitude, and the art that is attributed to each of them. . . . The virtue then, of everything is regulated and adorned by each other . . . a certain order, then, proper to each, becoming inherent in each, makes each thing good . . . [506*d, e*].

48. *Republic* 500*c, d*, trans. Paul Shorey (“Loeb Classics” [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935]), II, 69.

We see once more the profound meaning of the term “good”: ἀγαθόν. It is always a matter of the harmonizing principle, of the order to be achieved, of the perfection to be attained, the presence of which will permit the being to actualize itself and to maintain itself as it is, since the ultimate end of all products, whether they are physical generations or human actions, is to tend always toward a total Good and to receive limit from it.

Here we see the uncrossable barrier against which were dashed both the gnoseological “subjectivism” and the sociological relativism of the Sophists. Protagoras and Carneades admitted that they were incapable of developing a theory of the phenomenal world as such; and likewise Gorgias did not let himself think that, once the concepts which permit the objective world to be grasped as such are destroyed, the subject can subsist as reality. Similarly, the disassociation of the cosmic law and the human law, the opposition of Nature and of art or of convention, such as we find in the Sophistic doctrine of the fifth century, could never be developed into a positive theory of human society and of its history. The Sophists’ views in these matters opened perspectives which were developed only in modern times. They were so incompatible with the deepest aspirations of the Greek mind, that we might say, paraphrasing Plato,⁴⁹ that “before finding the Sophist,” before discovering the implicit meaning of the Sophistic criticism, the Greeks did nothing but find themselves again and redefine with infinitely more brilliance than before those positions which the Sophistic views were disturbing.

This appears forcefully in their way of conceiving the relationship of “art” to “Nature.”

VIII. “NATURE” AND “ART”

What the Greeks opposed to Nature was neither mind nor history but art (τέχνη), and their manner of conceiving art as “imitation” indicates quite clearly the relationships of subordination which they establish between the human world and the natural universe. Indeed, nothing would be more foreign to their system of values than the sense of “higher dignity” which Hegel grants to artificial objects. The Greeks, he wrote, “are accustomed to set an especial value” on “human inven-

49. *Sophist* 253c, trans. Harold North Fowler (“Loeb Classics” [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952]), II, 401: “Have we unwittingly stumbled upon the science that belongs to free men and perhaps found the philosopher while we were looking for the sophist?”

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

tions” insofar as they subjugate natural things and appropriate them to use.⁵⁰ Hegel, whose purely historical conception of the mind is, in every respect, diametrically opposed to the ancient idea of the cosmos, hastens to add that, according to the Greeks, “these human inventions belong to Spirit, and such an instrument is to be respected more than a mere natural object.” It could not possibly be a question for the Greeks of contesting the primacy of Nature and still less one of conferring upon human work a dignity higher than that of the products of Nature. On the contrary, human work acquires a form, an intelligibility, and a value precisely in that proportion in which it enters into the organizing productivity of Nature and manifests that teleology which is immanent in it. Art imitates Nature so well that, according to Aristotle, “if natural products could also be produced by art, they would move along the same line that the natural process actually takes!”⁵¹

When Aristotle compares the way in which art proceeds to that of Nature, he always brings out the eminent superiority of the latter over the former:

The physician or the builder sets before himself something quite definite . . . and once he has got this, each of them can tell you the causes and the rational grounds for everything he does, and why it must be done. Yet the Final Cause (purpose) and the Good (Beautiful) is more fully present in all the works of Nature in a similar sense.⁵²

The Sophistic theses on the relationships of Nature and of art show that the primacy granted to Nature made possible an absolute depreciation of human work. Indeed, agreeing in part at least with the fundamental conception of the Greeks, the Sophistic doctrine, which sets up a certain dualism between the natural order and the human order, declares that “the most beautiful and the greatest things are the work of Nature and of chance.”⁵³ On the other hand, works of art, human creations, occupy an inferior place in the order of the real. Nature still has primacy, but this Nature is no longer a cosmos founded upon

50. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, ed. Georg Lasson (Leipzig: Meiner, 1923), p. 544; trans. (from an earlier edition) J. Sibree (London: Bell, 1890), p. 250.

51. *Physics* 199a, trans. Philip H. Wicksteed (“Loeb Classics” [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957]), I, 173.

52. *Parts of Animals* 639b. 16, 21, trans. A. L. Peck (“Loeb Classics” [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945]), p. 57.

53. Plato *Laws* 889a, trans. B. Jowett (3d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), v, 273.

Justice and Good but a world dominated by the simple motion of procreation and by chance, which remains fundamentally foreign to the ephemeral and accidental productions of man. Constructive thought being second in the universe,⁵⁴ all that which is of human origin must be treated as an illusory reality deprived of all proper truth and of all proper value; therefore the productions of art are merely “child’s play” and “mortal realities, issued from other mortal realities.”

Just as in Hobbes’s view of natural science man and his works become mere phantasmagories, so in the light of this “materialism” neither reason nor humanity has support in the cosmos, and their products are nothing but “vain images” (εἰδωλα) having relationships only with themselves. Such are the works of painting, of music, and the other arts which serve these as auxiliaries. Likewise, politics “does not greatly participate in Nature” but stems principally from art. Therefore the institution of the laws does not exist at all through Nature; it is due to art, whose works are not true. It is always the extent of “participation” in Nature which makes the truth of human works, and, granted that the latter have for the most part very little in common with Nature, there is nothing true in their products.

The gods, too, “exist through the effect of art—not through Nature—but by virtue of certain laws, and they differ from one country to another according to conventions men have made only with themselves.” As in the Marxian “ideology,” art, religion, right, politics, and so forth—all these “imaginary” products of the “imaginary” activity of men—have no value in themselves. And just as in Marx the “ideated life” of man acquires a certain real and efficacious import to the extent that it enters into the material activity of man, so does this conception grant a certain value to the human mind insofar as it limits itself to soliciting Nature and to collaborating with her. But at this point a major difference arises. Marx is a “modern”; matter is for him, as for his master Hegel, an object for domination and exploitation. Therefore, he gives to the material objects produced by work and industry all the value which he refuses to give to the “mental objects” of ideology. On the other hand, for the materialism of antiquity, which is unaware of any negating attitude toward Nature, human arts have value and consequently engender “real” work only in the degree to which “they *asso-*

54. *Ibid.* 889c, d.

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

ciate their productive capacity to that of Nature, as do medicine, agriculture, and gymnastic.”⁵⁵

It is evident that such a theory, which isolated man in the middle of the universe, and which therefore went counter to the deepest aspirations of the Greek mind, could not in any sense take root in that mind and raise it to the notion of a historical creation and of a “reign of man,” affirming itself, like an empire within an empire, at the expense of objective Nature. Whereas the modern “naturalistic” conception stresses the discontinuity which characterizes the situation of man in reference to Nature, whereas Hobbes sees humanity being realized in the artificial Leviathan, and Marx makes of the Nature created by technical skill “the true anthropological Nature,” the conception of antiquity could only cry down all that which appears to break the continuity of *physis* and to escape its dynamism.

The natural teleology which orients all activities toward the good which “saves” is entirely contrary to a divine providence which would give a meaning—and a single meaning—to human history. In vain Aristotle shows that the polis, far from being an artificial work of men, is a system founded upon the teleology of Nature, and that the state is not an arbitrary restriction of natural freedom but a means of assuring it; he will never reach the idea that this freedom might be the final outcome of a historical evolution extending over thousands of years. He becomes akin to Hegel when he shows that the natural state, in the truest sense, must be sought not in the origins of human life but in the goal toward which it tends. But he departs radically from Hegel by his non-historical manner of conceiving this goal. The goal is not, as with Hegel, a pure “result of history” but a task which is ever *present*, independent of all historical evolution; consequently, its realization depends only accidentally upon the progressive convergence of factors grouped together by historical evolution, and in no sense must it be considered as a gradual progress which would make a human reality an unfinished form, without maturity, subordinated to a future destination.

IX. TIME AND HISTORY

All becoming is subordinated to the realization of the essence, but this becoming does not cause to appear a series of figures which might be

55. *Ibid.*

interpreted as the necessary moments of an evolution. The interval separating the moment of its “beginning” and that of its ending does not imply the mediation of *time* as *historical* time combining the past, the present, and the future in a single direction. But each actualized essence, each finished form “is”—that is, it *denies time*, not only the time it required to be realized but also that which comes afterward—it denies time until time denies it in its turn. *Time means corruption and dissolution*. It creates nothing, but the creation of a finished form causes to appear that which escapes time, that is to say, the ever *present* possibility of making appear the salutary “good” in man and in the universe. Whenever Nature manages to produce a full form, whenever man succeeds in mastering his chaotic matter, or whenever his work reaches a positive terminal point and produces measure and proportion, then is the perishable lit by the light of Being. But nothing that man or *physis* does resists time, that is, resists “change” and “dissolution.” Aristotle says:

All change is in its nature a “passing away.” And it is “in time” that everything begins and ceases to be. . . . Indeed, it is evident that *the mere passage of time itself is destructive rather than generative . . . because change is primarily a “passing away.”* So it is only incidentally that time is the cause of things coming into being and existing.⁵⁶

Time is not even the condition for cumulative experience. The truth comes to us outside of time; if truth finds its most adequate expression in this spatial cosmos which “always is” and which is not “something which at sometime comes into being and passes away,”⁵⁷ on the other hand, the river of time is the “river of oblivion,”⁵⁸ and it is with reason, says Aristotle, that the Pythagorean Paron said of time that it is “most ignorant” for indeed “it is in time . . . that everything is forgotten.”⁵⁹

We understand consequently that it was completely impossible to conceive from such premises time as maturation and to situate, for example, in a moment of time, or at a “terminal point” of history, that ideal city which was “in conformity with Nature” and in the name of which Plato or Hippias criticized the institutions which were in force.⁶⁰

56. *Physics* 222b. 16, 26, trans. Wicksteed, *op. cit.*, I, 415.

57. Plato *Republic* 537b.

58. *Ibid.* 621c.

59. Aristotle *Physics* 222b.

60. For Plato cf. *Republic* 452a; for Hippias cf. Plato *Protagoras* 337c, d.

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

For Plato in particular, it was a matter of complete “indifference” to know whether this city “exists now or ever will come into being.”⁶¹ What must be known about it is that “perhaps there is a pattern (paradigm) of it laid up in heaven for him who wishes to contemplate it and so beholding to constitute himself its citizen.” It is the ideal city, and “the politics of this city only will be his and of none other.”

We see that we are far from that celestial city “confused” and “con-mixed” with the terrestrial city and from St. Augustine’s proposal: “Of the original progress and the due limits of both which cities, what I now think fit to speak . . . I will now begin.”⁶²

The Greeks were fundamentally incapable of conceiving history as a great unity encompassing all humanity and conducting it, by virtue of a divine plan or of an immanent logic, toward a supreme goal. They were fully aware of the “progress” which they had made, not only in reference to the East, but also, and more importantly, in reference to their own past; and yet the concept of progress was totally lacking in them. They did not have, as Dilthey put it, “the slightest notion of progress”; they did not have “the historical awareness of an internal development and an internal progress.”⁶³

Indeed, no one had thought of interpreting the wars with the Medes or the Peloponnesian War according to the criteria of progress. Aeschylus, who felt as much admiration as Herodotus for the Persians,⁶⁴ gives no “historical” character to his song of triumph. The war between the Greeks and the Persians obeys the same “a-historical” laws which govern all human conflicts, and it is only for having transgressed the laws of Justice and passed over the boundaries of the domain assigned by destiny that Xerxes is punished. This is exactly the procedure of Herodotus: the tragic feeling of *Nemesis*, the deep conviction that the divine element which acts in history is “full of jealousy, and fond of troubling our lot,”⁶⁵ the perspective of fortuitous obstacles, of *συμφοραί*, over which man has no control, with which his style of writing history is

61. *Republic* 592b, trans. Shorey, *op. cit.*, II, 415 ff.

62. *The City of God* i. 35, trans. John Healey (London: Dent, 1931), I, 42–43.

63. W. Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, trans. Louis Sauzin (*Introduction à l'étude des sciences humaines* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1942], p. 274).

64. *Persians* ll. 654 ff., 767, 772.

65. I. 32. *φθονερὸν καὶ παραχῶδης*. Trans. George Rawlinson (New York: Tudor, 1941), p. 11.

imbued, made him fundamentally foreign to the idea that that which is exclusively human can link up in a durable way and produce some sort of progressive evolution. Goethe saw in the Battle of Valmy the beginning of a “new era”; the spectacle of Napoleon riding through the streets of Jena had aroused in Hegel the “miraculous feeling” of having witnessed a fabulous theophany, the appearance of the “soul of the world.” Herodotus or Aristotle would have been wholly incapable of that. The prodigious success of his royal disciple inspired in Aristotle no philosophico-historical reflection. When a man lives with the certainty of the finality and of the excellence of the world, he feels no need whatsoever to confer upon the passing and fortuitous event a privileged status destined to fortify his faith in his own autonomy or to calm his fears over his capacity to form his life according to the desire of his own will.

This total absence of the idea of progress in Greek historiography and philosophy was considered by Dilthey to be a regrettable “error”⁶⁶—an error which might be due to the fact that the “Greek theories received their definitive form at the time of Hellenic decadence.” Aristotle, he says, “had no longer before him any example of an authentically Greek State which destiny might have preserved from the general decadence”! From this curious way of characterizing the age of Alexander the Great, Dilthey drew the following surprising conclusion: “Thus experience itself gave birth to the idea that human beings obey a cyclical motion, if it does not produce the much gloomier idea that everything is dedicated to a progressive decadence”!

It is evident that this “experience” must not be understood in the “historicist” or “sociologist” sense Dilthey gives it and that the cyclical conception of time is no more a product of the decadence of “authentically Greek” states than monotheism is a religion of the desert. The decadence—and this time a very real decadence—of the Roman Empire, and, more particularly, the sack of Rome in 410, evoked in St. Augustine and in Paulus Orosius a philosophy of history which is the most radical negation of the cyclical conception of time. Orosius wrote the history of all the disasters suffered in the past by pagan peoples (“... *aut bellis gravis aut corrupta morbis aut terrarum motibus terribilia aut inundationibus aquarum insolita* . . .⁶⁷”) not for the purpose of demon-

66. Dilthey, *op. cit.*, pp. 273–74.

67. From the Dedication of his *Seven Books against the Pagans*, trans I. W. Raymond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), p. 30: “. . . the burdens of war, the ravages of disease, the horrors of famine, of terrible earthquakes, extraordinary floods . . .”

Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos

strating, as Plato does, for example,⁶⁸ the cyclical repetition of cosmic catastrophes, but to establish the providential aftermath of empires!

The idea of progress as well as that of the historicity of man as a fundamental characteristic of his structure was introduced into philosophy only with Christianity. For the Greeks, what has been is what shall be, and what is done is what shall be done again. We understand that this powerful way of establishing the perfect self-sufficiency of the present and the acceptance of destiny which it recommends made more or less impossible any reference, even implicit, to the criteria of progress. If human time—that is, time interpreted by small human perspectives—means destruction and dissolution, on the contrary, cosmic time, which unrolls in a closed circuit, incessantly returning upon itself—that is, the time of celestial periodicity—was considered to be the only symbol of salutary eternity. In circular motion, Greek thought saw the direct expression of the divinity, of eternity, and of the perfection of the cosmos. Circularity of time, acceptance of the present, elimination of historicity—all go together, so much so that Aristotle saw no difficulty in envisaging the possibility of an indefinite repetition of the Trojan War⁶⁹ or of any given human opinion.⁷⁰ Under these conditions there is truly neither a before nor an after; man is essentially impervious to a history which, if it does form his conditions of existence, in no way changes his profound destiny.

We understand now why Aristotle, the greatest encyclopedic genius of antiquity, considered history as less philosophical than poetry and did not think of writing a philosophy of history. The idea of cosmos and of cosmic time—that is, of the celestial periodicity which sets the rhythm of the existence of the universe without altering its organization or interrupting its perpetuity—made literally impossible any philosophical interrogation concerning the structure and the sense of historic time as such.

Briefly, the cosmos, a finite universe, ordered, harmonious, the object of religious veneration, of tragic fear or aesthetic contemplation rather than of scientific reconstruction or technical exploitation, is for the Greeks the model of order and of regularity to which the human world must conform as far as possible. Plato said, it is true, that the spectacle

68. *Laws* 677a.

69. *Problems* xviii. 3.

70. *Meteorology* i. 3.

of the objective cosmos is not truly a *μεγίστον μάθημα*⁷¹ for the soul but simply the occasional means which will permit it to isolate the idea of which this cosmos is the appearance. Beyond the observable cosmos, there is the “incorporeal” cosmos of ideas which transcends subjects as well as objects and which constitutes at the same time what is most subjective in subjects and most objective in objects. However, Plato never contested the “paradigmatic” value of the visible world. If, he declares in the *Timaeus*, man has received the gift of sight from the gods, it is so that, by contemplating the circular motions of the visible heaven, he may discover in it the supreme salutary virtue which will permit him to maintain himself solidly in being:

God devised and bestowed upon us vision to the end that we might behold the revolutions of Reason in the Heaven and use them for the revolvings of the reasoning that is within us, these being akin to those, the perturbable to the imperturbable; and that, through learning and sharing in calculations which are correct by their nature, by imitation of the absolutely unvarying revolutions of the God we might stabilize the variable revolutions within ourselves.⁷²

This passage illustrates admirably the fundamental conception of the Greeks, according to which Nature is value and, consequently, knowledge is “virtue” and “salvation.” The modern opposition between Nature and value really arose when Christianity had broken the sphere of the cosmos. At the time when Nature was being stripped of the divine, and as knowledge ceased to be salutary, the question of the *meaning of time* and the relationships of human time with salvation, itself viewed as a historical process, assumed an importance unsuspected by classical philosophy.

71. “The supreme teaching.” Cf. Plato *Republic*.

72. *Timaeus* 47b, c, trans. R. G. Bury (“Loeb Classics” [New York: Putnam, 1929]). VII, 107, 109.