

## REVERSING THE MYTH OF THE *POLITICUS*

The *Politicus* myth presents us with a peculiar cosmological picture. For it speaks of periods in which god guides the world and those in which he does not, and so contraposes a Golden Age guided by god with a subsequent period when god releases his governance of the universe, until everything goes so wrong that god has to return to the helm and restore order. The human race at this new stage, however, is said to have to resort *on its own* to ways of surviving in a more hostile universe which contrasts with the one depicted in the Golden Age. Thus, some renowned Plato scholars such as Cornford and Skemp, and with them the majority of interpreters of the dialogue, have taken the myth to suggest that we (that is, people in ‘the present era’,<sup>1</sup> which includes people at the time the myth is narrated, and presumably us as readers of Plato)<sup>2</sup> are now living in a reverse period when god is not exerting his governance.<sup>3</sup> This picture would seem particularly striking by comparison to cosmological suggestions in other late dialogues (such as the *Philebus*, the *Timaeus*, and the *Laws*), which rather tend to emphasize the existence of a divine *nous* that is responsible for the way our world is arranged, which is the best and most beautiful way possible.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Brisson has more recently challenged the traditional interpretation by suggesting a reading that makes our present era one

<sup>1</sup> Τὸν νῦν, 272b2. Translations of Plato are my own and are based on the text established by J. Burnet, *Platonis Opera* (Oxford 1900–7) (OCT). Compare also the latest edition by E. A. Dukes et al., *Platonis Opera I* (Oxford, 1995), which does not, however, introduce any significant textual variations from Burnet’s in the relevant passages treated in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Given that human conception and rearing are observable features of this age now as well as then: see *Pol.* 274a.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. F. M. Cornford, *Plato’s Cosmology* (London, 1937), 206–7; J. B. Skemp, *Plato’s Statesman* (London, 1952), 114; A. Diès, *Platon. Le Politique* (Paris, 1935), xxxiii; I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato’s Doctrines II* (London, 1963), 155; S. Rosen, ‘Plato’s myth of the reversed cosmos’, *Review of Metaphysics* 33 (1979), 59–85 at 75–6; C. Gill, ‘Plato and politics: the *Critias* and the *Politicus*’, *Phronesis* 24 (1979), 148–67 at 156; M. H. Miller, Jr, *The Philosopher in Plato’s Statesman* (The Hague, 1980), 39; H. R. Scodel, *Diairesis and Myth in Plato’s Statesman* (Göttingen, 1987), 77, 79; U. Hirsch, ‘*Mimeisthai* und verwandte Ausdrücke in Platons *Politikos*’, in C. Rowe (ed.), *Reading the Statesman. Proceedings of the III Symposium Platonicum* (Sank Augustin, 1995), 184–9; K. Dorter, *Form and Good in Plato’s Eleatic Dialogues* (Berkeley, 1994), 192–3. The idea seems also to have been suggested by G. E. L. Owen, ‘Plato on the undepictable’, in E. Lee et al. (edd.), *Exegesis and Argument* (Assen, 1973), 349–61 at 352, and W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy V* (Cambridge, 1978), 182.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. *Phil.* 28c ff., *Tim.* 46c–e, 48a, *Laws* 12.966d–e, 967d–e for the claim that the world as a *cosmos* is orderly due to the presence of a designing *nous* that orders it. This *nous* is generally described as god, and its governance over the universe is vigorously defended against materialistic opponents who conversely propose chance, spontaneity, necessity, or, in general, principles devoid of purpose and intelligence in their cosmological accounts (*Soph.* 265b–266b, *Phil.* 28d, *Tim.* 46c–e, cf. *Laws* 10.888d ff.). A similar opposition between intelligent and mindless causes seems to be present in the *Politicus*, insofar as the age in which god is the ‘cause’ of all good things (*αἰτία*, 270a3, cf. 273b7) is contrasted with a period in which the bodily (*τὸ σωματοειδές*) is presented as the cause (*αἴτιον*, 273b4) of the universe’s reversals. This bodily element is said to participate in great disorder (*ἀταξία*) before the *cosmos* is established, and to be inherent in the universe’s ‘ancient nature’ (*τὸ τῆς πάλαι ποτὲ φύσεως σύντροφον*, 273b4–5), which is also called ‘the state of ancient disharmony’ (*τὸ τῆς παλαιᾶς ἀναρμοστίας πάθος*, 273c7–d1).

governed, after all, by god.<sup>5</sup> Scholars, however, continue to endorse the view that in the *Politicus* myth the present era is a godless one, and in that sense they have been reverting to the traditional interpretation of the myth.<sup>6</sup> But why should this issue bear any weight in the context of the *Politicus* itself?

The *Politicus* myth has an explicit political function—that is, to correct the first definition of statesmanship in the dialogue<sup>7</sup>—and thus paves the ground for seeking the correct account of statesmanship (as will be provided by the third definition, 292d ff.). Yet what politics has to do with a cosmological myth is not immediately clear. While some earlier studies tended to treat it as a separate piece of cosmology,<sup>8</sup> recent work has taken the main message to be not cosmological, but ethical and political.<sup>9</sup> In any case, one may think that the myth is an unaccomplished piece of writing, one which is excessively long for the point it is supposed to convey.<sup>10</sup> For my part, I have argued elsewhere for a view of the cosmological and the ethical aspects as integrated,<sup>11</sup> and hope to further this line by showing, in addition, that the *Politicus* myth does after all possess a neat structure. The most pressing question is why Plato should choose the picture of cosmic reversals. It has been argued, for example, that the contrast with the ideal age of Cronus is meant to suggest that politics takes place in a universe in which we must be autonomous, and this must therefore be a godless universe, where we are no longer directly nursed by god.<sup>12</sup> But the inference from autonomy to godlessness is dubious and still in need of further investigation.

On the other hand, it would be quite puzzling (though certainly not impossible) if Plato were trying to make a political point at the expense of either totally diluting a cosmological picture that he had emphasized in other dialogues, or sending a message that is opposite to it by now denying that we are living under god. One main question centres around whether or not the universe has a teleological nature, and whether we should expect it to provide a background for politics. Lane has recently granted that

<sup>5</sup> Cf. L. Brisson, *Le Même et l'Autre dans la structure ontologique du Timée de Platon* (Paris, 1974), 478–96 and id., 'Interprétation du mythe du Politique', in Rowe (n. 3), 349–63.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g. J. Annas and R. Waterfield, *Plato. Statesman* (Cambridge, 1995), xiv, 21, n. 24; G. R. F. Ferrari, 'Myth and conservatism in Plato's *Statesman*', in Rowe (n. 3), 389–97 at 392; C. Rowe, *Plato. Statesman* (Warminster, 1995), 13; M. Lane, *Method and Politics in Plato's Statesman* (Cambridge, 1998), 103–4. The last three do take account of Brisson's suggestions, but to my mind fail to counter them adequately. For other adherents to the traditional view, cf. K. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato* (Cambridge, 2000), 254 and n. 22, who contains a brief reference to Brisson but relies on Lane, and M. M. McCabe, *Plato and His Predecessors* (Cambridge, 2000), 148, 142, n. 8, who talks of the 'Brisson/Rowe' interpretation as if they were the same (147 nn. 31 and 32), when in fact, as we shall see further below, they differ in fundamental ways.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. 267c–268e; 274e–276d.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Brisson (n. 5, 1974); E. Ostenfeld, *Forms, Matter and Mind: Three Strands in Plato's Metaphysics* (The Hague, 1982); R. Mohr, *The Platonic Cosmology* (Leiden, 1985); T. M. Robinson, *Plato's Psychology* (Toronto, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. C. Rowe, 'The *Politicus*: structure and form', in C. Gill and M. M. McCabe (edd.), *Form and Argument in Late Plato* (Oxford, 1996), 153–78 at 160; McCabe (n. 6), 142, n. 7.

<sup>10</sup> For voices along these lines, see Skemp (n. 2), 52 and Annas and Waterfield (n. 6), xvi; also Lane (n. 6), 9–10, 125–6 believes that the length of the myth will become later a matter of criticism. But see C. Rowe, 'The *Politicus* and other dialogues', in C. Rowe and M. Schofield (edd.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2000), 233–57 at 240, who notes that, despite the interlocutors' initial qualms about the length of the myth, 'the Visitor's final view seems to be that it was not, after all, excessive': cf. *Pol.* 286b–287a.

<sup>11</sup> See G. R. Carone, 'Cosmic and human drama in Plato's *Statesman*', *Polis* 12 (1993), 99–121.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Gill (n. 3), 156; Lane (n. 6), 108, 113; McCabe (n. 6), 161–2, 240. I shall return to this issue further below, section II.6.

teleological concerns may bear some weight as far as an interpretation of the myth is concerned, but argued that teleology may be present in the godless cycles insofar as the universe has intelligence, and that the rule of such intelligence (even without god) is 'quite impressive': thus, a world in reverse does not in fact undermine our hopes for human existence in the present era.<sup>13</sup> But on close examination we realize that we get a rather different picture from the text: without god, things in the universe get worse and worse; the time when the universe's intelligence helps to run things optimally thanks to remembrance of god's teaching is extremely brief (273c5–6), and with the passing of time the bodily element of the universe and its state of ancient disharmony 'increasingly even rule' and eventually 'flourish' (273c7–d1) so that in the end the universe, 'mixing together small goods with a great mixture of the opposite things, reaches danger of destruction of itself and of the things within it' (273d1–4).<sup>14</sup> So how can one look forward to the best kind of politics when the universe itself is on the path to decay? This question becomes particularly pressing when we realize that, as the myth states, 'we imitate and follow the universe for all time' (274d6–7). That is, if Plato means to inscribe human and political occurrences within a larger cosmic picture, it would seem to be rather discouraging or indeed contradictory to be told on the one hand, as for example Lane and Owen take it, that the perfect ruler of the third definition is a prospective ideal whose advent one must remain open to, when, on the other, the standard reading of the myth (shared by Lane, Owen, and others, whether or not they are aware of its implications) suggests that things will necessarily go worse in the cycle in which we live.<sup>15</sup> How can one then make sense of the possibility of human

<sup>13</sup> Lane (n. 6), 103–4. In a similar line, cf. McCabe (n. 6), 142ff. Lane believes that the universe's self-rule would *not* be so impressive if it had 'started moving rectilinearly when left to itself'. Yet Lane's account, while relying on 269d5–270a8, misses the complete picture of reverse cycles given in the *Politicus*, where circular rotation takes place only at their very beginning and for the very briefest period after god's release of the universe, which is soon followed by increasing deterioration and accumulation of greater evils than goods (273a1–d4)—and this, as I explain in n. 14, must presumably result in rectilinear motion. The passage Lane mentions (269d5–270a8) must thus be read side by side with the further evidence provided by the myth, which suggests that the 'extremely well-balanced' state of the universe at 270a8 is a mechanical explanation for why the universe continues rotating circularly after release from god, but cannot be its sustained state for a prolonged period of time. Thus, I read the *πολλὰς περιόδων μυριάδας* of 270a7 to qualify the *ἀνάπαλιν πορεύεσθαι* (so that each reverse cycle takes place for tens of thousands of years), and the explanation that follows ('because the universe is most big and extremely well balanced on a very small base') to be an account—only—of how rotation in reverse can occur in the first place. (This account, in addition, is not exhaustive, since later on further causes will be given for this rotation in reverse: see below, n. 14.)

<sup>14</sup> This bodily element (*τὸ σωματοειδές*) appears as the main cause of those cosmic reversals (cf. *τούτων . . . αἴτιον* 273b4). In this way, the bodily can be seen to determine the *direction* of the universe's motion—*τὸ ἀνάπαλιν ἵέναι* (269d2)—even though the reverse cycle starts by being *circular* (cf. *περιάγεται*, 269c7) due to the world's intelligence (269c7–d2). Now, since the bodily is in itself full of *ἀταξία* (see above, n. 4), the fundamental tendency of the reverse cycle is towards disorder. This is how, towards the end of the cycle, this disorder caused by the bodily prevails to such an extent that the universe is on the verge of destruction (cf. *διαφθορὰς κίνδυνον*, 273d3); a situation that must in turn entail the loss of its originally circular motion, which was only present due to remembrance of god which is soon lost. In this way we can see how even any initial rule exerted by the world's memory seems very precarious in comparison with the underlying force exerted by the corporeal.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. especially Lane (n. 6), 10–11, 146. For various authors who, to a greater or lesser extent, acknowledge the realizability of the ideal ruler of the third definition as a human possibility, see also G. E. L. Owen, 'The place of the *Timaeus* in Plato's dialogues' [1953], in R. E. Allen (ed.), *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics* (London 1965), 313–38 at 332, 335; Rowe (n. 10), 240; Gill (n. 3), 150. All of these authors, however, believe that we live in one of those cycles which the text

and political progress when the universe does not provide proper support? Of course, one answer could be the following: true, our cycle will get worse and worse, but then god will take pity and come back again: thus, Rowe and Skemp read the text as promising a new age of Cronus.<sup>16</sup> But in such an age, if the structure of cosmic cycles is—as this interpretation seems to take it—repetitive, there would be no politics:<sup>17</sup> what is the point, therefore, of advocating the best kind of politics in the rest of the *Politicus*, if the myth suggests that the cosmos either prevents us from such an achievement in our current cycle or promises the abolition of all politics in a future one?

Thus, it is crucial for any interpretation of the political importance of the myth of the *Politicus* first to become clear as to what exact picture the myth of cosmic reversals presents us with. In this paper I wish to show that the traditional interpretation is wrong, or at least extremely problematic, not only for the philosophical consequences that would result from it as far as an interpretation of the whole dialogue is concerned, but, particularly, because it fails to do justice to the text of the myth itself. Therefore, we do not need to commit Plato to the difficulties on a political level that would follow from that interpretation. Indeed, I wish to show that he believes politics, even the best kind of politics that humans are capable of, does take place in a universe under providential care so that it will not take us myriads of revolutions (that is, millions of years) to expect an upgrade in the quality of our human existence.

In what follows, I shall argue that there is not enough evidence in the text of the myth to support the traditional interpretation. Further, the traditional interpretation fails to preserve the consistency of that text on a literal reading, as I instead intend to do. To this extent, I agree with Brisson's basic suggestion that in the *Politicus* our era is one which is after all governed by god. However, I disagree on some points of interpretation of the myth and think that this issue deserves more thorough scrutiny, including a more detailed consideration of opposing points of view and their possible virtues and flaws. Thus, I undertake here to revive the debate and challenge the traditional interpretation by defending the thesis that, according to a literal reading of the myth, we are living in a period of guidance by god, and that such a reading, unlike the traditional one, helps to maximize the consistency of the whole myth as far as that is at all possible in this kind of literary medium.

As a matter of fact, the widespread view has seen the *Politicus* as dealing mainly with the opposition between two cycles, that of Cronus and that of Zeus, by taking the

describes as leading to increasing destruction (273a–d; cf. above, nn. 3 and 6). Lane, for her part, later on concedes that—on her interpretation—the universe is ‘slowly descending into chaos’ (110), but resorts to the notion of second-order imitation, by which humans need not imitate the cosmos in everything it does, but rather—only—in the fact that it is autonomous, which allows that humans may—contrary to the cosmos—‘climb out of their helplessness’ (ibid.). But this reading is neither the most natural nor the one literally suggested by the text, which presents us as ‘following’ the universe in a more direct way: thus, for example, when the universe undergoes a reversal of its direction, so does human life (270d–e); and when the universe is described as moving towards decay there is emphasis put on the *injustices* (*ἀδικία*) that ‘it itself *has and communicates* to the living beings [within it]’ (273cl–2). It must be noted also that the realization of the ideal constitution would require the co-operation of arts dealing with the satisfaction of external needs (such as food and shelter, 288d–289b); but if, as Lane concedes, the universe itself is on the path of deterioration (so that astronomical disorder affecting the climate will ensue), in time it will inevitably cease providing us with the raw materials for the satisfaction of those needs. In that regard again, the realization of Plato's political ideal seems to need the support of the universe (and this intuition recurs at *Laws* 4.704a–705c, 709a–c).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Skemp (n. 3), 114; Rowe (n. 6), 13; also Cornford (n. 3), 207.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Pol.* 271e8.

two as going in opposite cosmic directions and the latter as one of those periods of absence of god, when the universe is left to itself.<sup>18</sup> But curiously enough none of the adherents of this view seems to have attempted to sketch a reading that takes account of the evidence of the whole myth. They often tend to fasten on one or other passage of a much more complex myth which also contains counter-evidence for their claims. Further, some particular details in the myth could be invoked as challenges against the alternative interpretation. In trying to account for this, I shall set out to defend the reading of the main body of the text (268e8 ff., esp. 269c4–273e4) as presenting a view of our actual universe as one ruled by god. I shall start by challenging the prevalent reading on some basic points of textual interpretation and afterwards proceed to propose my own reading of the text and my own answers to possible objections. This procedure is independent of any actual adherence to a literal exegesis of the myth or not.<sup>19</sup> Rather, becoming clear about what the text actually says is an indispensable preliminary step to any further discussion about the possible philosophical advantages or disadvantages of taking such a text literally. Nonetheless, one of the strengths of this procedure will be to show that, *even* on a literal reading—and whether or not one chooses to take other mythical details seriously—there is good evidence that god's designing mind prevails in our present universe. Finally, I shall suggest what consequences my interpretation has for the overall political argument of the dialogue.

### I. PRELIMINARY REMARKS: SOME GAPS IN THE TRADITIONAL READING

The *Politicus* myth offers a picture of alternate cosmic cycles which are referred to the agency of god and the universe respectively. The 'law' (θέμις) governing these cycles is summarized at 269e–270a:

we must not say either that the universe turns itself always (στρέφειν ἑαυτὸν αἰεί), nor that, as a whole, it is always turned by god (ὑπὸ θεοῦ στρέφεσθαι) in two opposite revolutions, nor that, finally, two gods with opposite designs turn the universe. But . . . the only remaining possibility is that, sometimes, the universe is guided by a different, divine cause . . . and at some others, when it is released, it moves by itself . . . backwards deprived of divine intervention (cf. 269d–e).

Now, if this is so, the following pieces of evidence can be taken to suggest that Plato is intending to give a picture which makes our cycle one ruled by god.

<sup>18</sup> The recent translation and commentary of the *Politicus* by Rowe (n. 6), 12–13 actually considers three cycles instead of the standard interpretation which has two, though Rowe, far from the view that I wish to defend, believes that our age of Zeus, though still following the same direction as that of Cronus, is one which is *not* under divine care at all; in this latter sense then he has not departed from the traditional view. See also C. Rowe, *Plato. Statesman* (Indianapolis, 1999), 21 and id. (n. 10), 239–40.

<sup>19</sup> For a literal interpretation see e.g. T. M. Robinson, 'Demiurge and world-soul in Plato's *Politicus*', *American Journal of Philology* 88 (1967), 57–66; R. Mohr, 'The formation of the cosmos in the *Statesman* myth', *Phoenix* 32 (1978), 250–2 and id. (n. 8), 141–57. Against, see e.g. Cornford (n. 3), 207; A. J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, II: *Le dieu cosmique* (Paris, 1949), 129–30; H. Cherniss, 'The sources of evil according to Plato', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 98 (1954), 23–30 at 29, n. 44; Brisson (n. 5, 1974), 478–96; Ostenfeld (n. 8), 118; G. Naddaf, 'Mind and progress in Plato', *Polis* 12 (1993), 122–33 at 123; Carone (n. 11); Rowe (n. 6), 13; J. Dillon, 'The Neoplatonic exegesis of the *Statesman* myth', in Rowe (n. 3), 364–74 at 374; McCabe (n. 6), 142, n. 7.

1. Plato proposes to integrate ancient legends (λεχθέντα) in the myth, among which there is the phenomenon concerning

the change in the setting and rising of the sun and the other stars, so that, from where it rises now, in that same place it set at that time, and it rose from the opposite place; and it was then when, bearing witness in favour of Atreus, the god changed it [i.e. the course of the sun and stars] to its present form' (ὁ θεός . . . μετέβαλεν αὐτὸ ἐπὶ τὸ νῦν σχῆμα). (269a1–5)

Here it is *the god* (Zeus, more specifically, in the legend which is being referred to) who changes the course of the heavenly motions,<sup>20</sup> something that will be characteristic of god's action at the beginning of the cycles of god's guidance in the myth, as opposed to those in which he merely lets go of the universe when it is left to itself in its reverse march (cf. e.g. 270a, 273e).<sup>21</sup> The present form of the motion of the universe would therefore have its cause in god and would be suggestive of his presence.

How has the standard reading dealt with the evidence of this legend which is incorporated in the myth? Rowe, for example, associates this phenomenon with what happens in the past age of Cronus (rather than the present age of Zeus).<sup>22</sup> This claim may square with his denial that god guides (and therefore rules)<sup>23</sup> the direction of our present cosmic cycle; however, the claim is directly contradicted by the evidence, which speaks of the *god* of the legend changing the heavenly bodies to their *present* form (269a5).

Some others, also defending the view that we are presently living in a period *without* the guidance of god, cannot but accuse Plato of contradiction<sup>24</sup> in the face of the evidence of the legend, which conversely shows god turning the universe to its present direction. Since that—traditional—interpretation suggests that the universe is guided by god in the *opposite* cycle to the present one, the picture of the legend becomes doubly contradictory, given that the text denies explicitly that two different gods with opposing thoughts turn the universe in opposite directions (270a1–2).

For my part, I shall show in due course that Plato maintains the point suggested by the introductory legend to the very end of the myth, where he tells us that the universe 'was turned' (στρεφθέντος, 273e6) to its present path of generation, after we read about god's actively turning (στρέψας, 273e3) the universe when he comes back to the helm.<sup>25</sup>

2. At 272b2–3 the present era (τὸν νῦν) is characterized as that of Zeus, in a way that conforms to 1. Nothing can be made of the fact that the Eleatic Stranger alludes

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Euripides, *Electra* 699–730 and *Orestes* 996–1012, mentioned by P. Vidal-Naquet, 'Plato's myth of the *Statesman*. The ambiguities of the golden age and of history', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 98 (1978), 132–41 at 136, for the reference to Zeus.

<sup>21</sup> It cannot be held, as Dorter (n. 3), 193 implies, that it is 'some more fundamental god' than Zeus or Cronus who both turns the universe in the age of Cronus and reverses its direction in the present age, given the text's denial that the same god could turn the universe in opposite directions (269e6–7, 269e9–270a1).

<sup>22</sup> See Rowe (n. 6), 187 ad 269a7.

<sup>23</sup> See Rowe (n. 6), 192–3 ad 271d3–4.

<sup>24</sup> As done by Scodel (n. 3), 80.

<sup>25</sup> Thus, the universe 'being turned' at 273e6, in the passive, suggests that it was turned by an external factor, not by itself; and that external factor must most likely be the god who was just given the function of 'turning' (στρέψας) at 273e3. Cf. especially 269e8–270a2, where the possibility of the universe turning itself—στρέφειν ἑαυτόν—is contrasted with its being turned by god—in the passive, ὑπὸ θεοῦ στρέφεσθαι—or god turning it—στρέφειν αὐτόν. For more details on στρέφειν at 273e3–6 see below, section II. 6.

to the age of Zeus as 'this [life] which is said to be in the presence of Zeus' (τόνδε δ' ὄν λόγος ἐπὶ Διὸς εἶναι), as if he were not himself endorsing that saying.<sup>26</sup> For the guise of the myth is to *incorporate* popular legends (cf. λεχθέντα, 268e8), not to reject them:

All these things, and also many others, arise from the same phenomenon . . . but because of the large amount of time [that has passed] some of them have been lost, and others are told scatteredly (δισπαρμέναι), each separate from the other. But which is the phenomenon that is the cause of all these things, nobody has said, and should now be asserted. (269b5–c1)

In addition, it would not seem right to disbelieve those reports in this mythical context, since in this regard the Stranger expresses complaints about the fact that many old stories 'are, *incorrectly*, now disbelieved by many' (λόγων οἱ νῦν ὑπὸ πολλῶν οὐκ ὀρθῶς ἀπιστοῦνται, 271b2–3)

The Stranger's apparent commitment to the view that we are in a period governed by god is in turn confirmed by the further assertion at 271d4, where we are told that in the age of Cronus god took care of the universe 'as now' (ὥς νῦν):<sup>27</sup> this is indeed the reading of all the manuscripts, so we do not need to amend the text as Burnet does.<sup>28</sup>

3. With its emphasis on the close connection between macro- and microcosm, the text states that the direction of ageing of individuals follows the direction of the cosmos (271b7–8; cf. 273e11–274a1, 274d6–7). In the age of Cronus it is said that souls fall into the earth as seed (272e3), with the implication that they follow the normal process of growth and death, like a plant. Similarly in the age of Zeus there is normal conception, generation, and nurture of living beings (274a), which suggests that both the era of Cronus and that of Zeus follow the same direction of microcosmic events (from youth to old age) and so therefore should the macrocosm.

If this is so, then both the age of Cronus and that of Zeus would be opposed to periods involving a reversal of the ageing process, from old to young (as mentioned, for example, at 270d–e, cf. below, II.3). Such a reversal of the ageing process is mentioned as the biggest phenomenon accompanying the cycle opposite to the present one (indeed, it is said to 'accompany the reversal of the universe, whenever the phase contrary to the one which is now established begins', 270d3–4, cf. 270d9–e1). Those interpreters who, instead, wish to contend that our era follows and is opposed in respect of direction to the one of Cronus are therefore led to postulate that: (i) in the age of Cronus people were born from the earth as old and then grew young,<sup>29</sup> or (ii) conversely, that the growing younger of the old belongs to our present era.<sup>30</sup> In both cases, however, they do so at the cost of overlooking the evidence mentioned in the previous paragraph.

<sup>26</sup> As contended by Scodel (n. 3), 80 and Rowe (n. 6), 193 ad loc., and suggested by Ferrari (n. 6), 394, n. 17. The same considerations apply to the allusion to 'the gifts of the gods told of old' at 274c5–6; *pace* McCabe (n. 6), 149, n. 40.

<sup>27</sup> Even though the care he exerts now is different from the one in the age of Cronus; cf. below section II.6.

<sup>28</sup> Let us notice that, as some scholars have suggested, it may be necessary to restore a connective here, and so read, e.g. ὥς νῦν {καί} κατὰ after Hermann, followed by Diès (n. 3), ad loc.; an omission that might be explained by a kind of haplography, given the similarity between καί and the first three letters of κατὰ.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Vidal-Naquet (n. 20), 137; Gill (n. 3), 156; J. Dillon, 'Plato and the golden age', *Hermathena* 153 (1992), 21–36 at 29; Lane (n. 6), 106; McCabe (n. 6), 160.

<sup>30</sup> As contended by Scodel (n. 3), 79.

Now, a defender of the traditional reading might perhaps attempt to push point (i), by arguing that souls ‘falling into the earth as seeds’ at *Pol.* 272e3 need not (contrary to my interpretation) suggest a normal process of growth from young to old, like a plant: if we imagine that we are in a reverse cycle (like a film played backwards), where people grow from old to young, couldn’t the end of the process be described as ‘falling into the earth as seed’? If so, the evidence would be insufficient to show that the age of Cronus is one where people grow from young to old, and therefore that our age, following the same direction of growth, should be one governed by god.

This suggestion, however, does not succeed. For, at the end of the reverse process, nothing would *fall into the earth as seed*. If we imagine, as the objection suggests, a film played in reverse, we would not have a seed *falling* into the earth, but the baby plant gradually *disappearing* into the earth—for in the film played forward the baby plant will appear from the earth some time after development from a seed. (In fact it is the verb ‘disappear’, not fall, that the Stranger uses for the reversal of ageing at 270e8–9.) Thus, it appears that the language of ‘falling into the earth as seed’ can only be interpreted one way, that is, as describing the normal planting of a seed at the beginning of a cycle where generation goes from young to old.

Let us add, in passing, that Plato has not invented this motif of people being born as old: in Hesiod, for example, we are told that the race of iron will be destroyed when humans are born with grey hair (*Op.* 181; cf. *Pol.* 273e10–11 on ‘bodies newly born from the earth with grey hair’), something that suggests a state of degradation which seems far removed from what is otherwise described as the ideal conditions of the age of Cronus (for example, god being a close shepherd of humans, mild weather, and spontaneous growth of things from earth). If this is so, then our interpretation of the direction of ageing in the era of Cronus in the myth would in turn match its legendary background.

Having, not exhaustively, highlighted these as basic points against the standard reading, I now set out to present my own reading of the structure of the myth and the overall picture of cosmic cycles that it presents. I shall proceed by following mainly the sequential order of the text and inserting my view into a description of the overall picture of the cosmic cycles in the myth.

## II. THE STATES OF THE COSMOS SUCCESSIVELY PRESENTED IN THE TEXT

### 1. *Creation of the universe*

God is described as the ‘begetter’, ‘demiurge’, and ‘father’ of the cosmos (cf. e.g. 269d9, 270a5, 273b1–2), which indicates his creation of it—presumably after a precosmic state of disorder (*ἀταξία*) due to the prevalence of the bodily condition of the universe prior to its creation (cf. 273b–c).

### 2. *Overall description of the alternate cycles*

At 269c4–d2 and 270a3–7 we are given a picture of the opposite cycles:

- (a) *sometimes* (τοτέ μὲν, 269c4, 270a3) god himself ‘guides and helps the universe revolve as it goes’ 269c4–5; that is, the universe ‘is guided by a different, divine cause’ (ὅπ’ ἄλλης συμποδηγείσθαι θείας αἰτίας, 270a3).



- (b) *at some other times* (τοτέ δέ, 269c5, 270a5) he lets the universe go, so that it ‘spontaneously goes back round in the opposite direction’ (πάλιν αὐτόματον εἰς τὰναντία περιάγεται, 269c5–7); this is described as a reverse march (ἀνάπαλιν ἰέναι, 269d2). The universe is said to ‘go itself by itself (δι’ ἑαυτοῦ αὐτόν), released at such a moment as to go backwards’ (ἀνάπαλιν πορεύεσθαι), 270a5–7.

In view of these expressions suggesting backward motion when the universe is released, we can call the cycles described at (b) the ‘reverse cycles’, in the sense that the universe moves in a reverse direction. So we shall call ‘forward’ those periods guided by god, and ‘reverse’ those in which the universe is left to itself, without the guidance of god. In any case, what is crucial is not to speak in terms of forward or reverse (since both are opposite as such), but in terms of cycles in which the world is or is not actively guided by god.

It is important to notice the role of god in the reverse cycles. He is not said to die or disappear, but to release control of the universe<sup>31</sup> and to leave it or go off to his place of outlook (cf. ἀπέστη, 272e5), so that he stops having any direction over the course of the universe (since there cannot be two gods nor the same god turning it in opposite revolutions, 269e8–270a2), and does nothing, except observing passively what is going on from his place of outlook (272e5).

Now, at 270b7–8 the Stranger summarizes the double picture, by saying ‘sometimes (τοτέ μὲν) the universe moves in the direction in which it *now* circles (ἐφ’ ᾧ νῦν κυκλεῖται); at some other times (τοτέ δέ) it goes in the opposite direction (ἐπὶ τὰναντία)’. Here he does not define which cycle is reverse or which is forward (both are opposite as such), though, to go on with the order of exposition he has chosen above, at 269c–d and 270a, by which first (through the expression τοτέ μὲν) he presents the forward cycle guided by god and secondly (through the expression τοτέ δέ) the reverse cycle, we may suspect that ‘the direction in which the universe now circles’, mentioned at 270b, corresponds to the forward cycles, that is the periods of god’s guidance.

If this hypothesis is correct, then even the chosen mode of exposition would match the evidence we have already collected from the preliminary legend concerning this cycle being one guided by god. For there it is god who is said to change the course of the sun and the other stars to its present direction (269a1–5), and his turning the universe is a characteristic of those periods of god’s intervention in the myth (cf. 269c5, 269e5–270a5). It is also important to recall that, according to the legend, the god in question is traditionally Zeus,<sup>32</sup> under whom, in turn, we are said to be living in the myth (272b2–3). Further evidence will help to confirm this.

### 3. *Contrary motion to the present: reversal of the ageing process—accompanying reversal in the universe*

In fact, the text at 270b10–271b3 goes on to say that, *in the motion contrary to the present one*, a lot of changes take place. First, there is *destruction of animals* (270c11–12), something that will afterwards be described as what immediately follows the release of the universe by god (273a3–4), and which can therefore suggest that the motion we are considering is one of reversal. Secondly, and most importantly, there is the *growing younger of the old*, until they disappear (270d–e). This reversal of the ageing process is said to accompany (συνεπόμενον) the reversal

<sup>31</sup> Cf. ἀνήκεν 269c5, ἀνεθῆ 270a5, ἀφεθέντα 270a6, ἀφόμενος 272e4, ἄφεις 273c5.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. n. 20 above.

of the universe (*τῇ τοῦ παντός ἀνελίξει*), whenever the phase contrary to the one which is now established begins (*ὅταν ἡ τῆς νῦν καθεστηκυίας ἐναντία γίγνηται τροπή*, 270d3–4). It is essential to bear in mind that in the myth the microcosmic events follow the same direction as that of the cosmos, as we can gather from the general rule at 274d6–7 that ‘we imitate and accompany (*συνεπόμενοι*) the whole cosmos for all time’ (cf. 274a1: all other things ‘imitate and accompany the state of the universe’, and 271b7–8: ‘generation circles back in the opposite direction to follow the revolution’).

Further, it is suggested that, during this period, people were ‘born from the earth’ (*γηγενεῖς*) as old and again grew young (271a2–b3). But, if there are earthborn during this age of reversal, which are born from the earth as old, they should be distinguished from the earthborn of the age of Cronus, since, as was shown above, it is implied at 272e3 that the latter are born from *seeds* (*σπέρματα*), and therefore follow the normal process of growth from young to old, like a plant.

How does the text describe a transition to the age of Cronus? Such a transition is rather understated, since the focus at 271a4–c2 seems to be to narrate the amazing phenomenon of people being born from the earth, even though we shall soon find out that such a phenomenon has indeed taken place over a long span of time comprising opposite cosmic cycles. Nonetheless, the text seems to provide room for a transition to the earthborn of the age of Cronus at 271b3, where the Stranger admonishes us to consider ‘what comes next’.

#### 4. The reversal of the reversal

4.1. *The earthborn race (γηγενεῖς) and the (forward) age of Cronus.* We are told that ‘it follows (*ἐπόμενον*) the old going to the nature of a child, that from *those who are dead and lying in the earth*, there again people are constituted and return to life,<sup>33</sup> as generation circles back in the opposite direction to follow the revolution’ (271b4–8). We can wonder whether the coming to life again from the earth at 271b6–7:

- (A) takes place within the same period of reversal as 3 (as Brisson believes);<sup>34</sup> or
- (B) represents the start of a new period (namely, the forward age of Cronus, which will be mentioned more explicitly from 271c4 onwards).<sup>35</sup> In this case, being born from the earth after (or ‘following’, *ἐπόμενον*, 271b4) the growing young of the old constitutes a new cycle both for humans and also for the cosmos, as seems also suggested by the statement that ‘generation circles back in the opposite direction to follow the revolution’ (271b7–8). And this process would then correspond directly to the age of Cronus and the earthborn mentioned there (271c ff.).<sup>36</sup>

My reading allows for either interpretation, since in both cases the direction of the age of Cronus (as shown by the direction of microcosmic events) is opposite to

<sup>33</sup> ἐκ τῶν τετελευτηκότων αὖ, κειμένων δὲ ἐν γῇ, πάλιν ἐκεῖ συνισταμένους καὶ ἀναβιωσκομένους.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Brisson (n. 5, 1995), 353, 358–9, who understands the reign of Cronus as starting at 271c3.

<sup>35</sup> Either reading seems to be possible depending on whether one takes the *ἐπόμενον* at 271b4 to mean logical dependence of events (which may take place within the same cycle) or a temporal transition between different cycles respectively.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. 272a–b for the connection between *γηγενεῖς* and the age of Cronus.

the motion where people are born from old to young; but, as this was in turn said to be opposite to the present one (cf. 270d4 and above, II.3), then the conclusion stands that the age of Zeus follows the same direction as the age of Cronus.

My preference, nonetheless, is for interpretation B. First, since this reading presupposes the active presence of god during the time of the earthborn mentioned at 271b4–c2, it can make perfect sense of the allusion to god at 271c2, where we are told that some exceptional humans were taken by god (*θεός*) to another destiny instead of being reborn from the earth (interpretation A, by contrast, leaves that allusion to god unexplained, if it takes it to occur in a reverse period). Second, interpretation B would account for the Stranger's further reference to the age of Cronus as 'the previous[ly mentioned] one' at 271d3, as we shall now see.

4.2. *The contrast between the ages of Cronus and Zeus at 271c–d.* After the reference to the earthborn race at 271a2–c2, Young Socrates asks whether the age of Cronus took place 'during those turnings or in these' (271c4–5). To this the Stranger replies: 'What you asked about the spontaneous birth of everything for humans least of all (*ἥκιστα*) belonged to the present established revolution, but this also belonged to the former one (*τῆς ἔμπροσθεν*)' (271c9–d3). This wording might be seen to present a challenge to our interpretation above, since it now looks as if the age of Cronus is indeed contraposed rather than parallel to the age of Zeus.<sup>37</sup>

My answer to this challenge consists in accepting that there is an actual contraposition between the ages of Cronus and Zeus. However, it need not be one of direction of motion. First, it is conceivable that the allusions to 'those turnings' and to 'the former' or 'the previous' revolution are *not* to an immediately temporally previous cycle to ours.<sup>38</sup> Rather (particularly if one follows interpretation B above), it seems perfectly natural that the Stranger's reference to 'the former one' (*τῆς ἔμπροσθεν*, 271d2–3) should be to the era of the earthborn just previously mentioned in the text (271b–c) instead of the era of the earthborn immediately preceding our time.

Second, we must note the qualified way in which the age of Cronus is said to have 'least of all' (*ἥκιστα*) belonged to our era: it is 'with regard to the spontaneous birth of everything for humans' (*περὶ τοῦ πάντα αὐτόματα γίγνεσθαι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις*, 271d1). And the text goes on to explain how, in this ideal age of Cronus, both humans and all the fruits sprang naturally from the earth; there was no need for agriculture; there were no wild animals, no wars, no families or states since all the parts of the universe were under the close care of gods; and there was a warm climate obviating the need for fire (271d–272b). It is, then, at most in all these ways that the age of Cronus is 'least of all' the current revolution (cf. 271d1); but not in respect of the direction of the revolution.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> In particular, it does look as if the age of Cronus is described as the one temporally previous (*τῆς ἔμπροσθεν*) to ours. I am grateful to David Sedley for pressing this objection.

<sup>38</sup> Brisson presents the interesting suggestion that 'in those turnings' (*ἐν ἐκείναις τροπαῖς*) at 271c5 may refer to a generic past, including more than one cycle. The same could apply to the 'at that time' (*τότε*) at 271a2 and 4. Cf. L. Brisson, 'Interprétation du mythe du *Politique*', paper presented at the Third Symposium Platonicum, Bristol (1992). However, I find his further claim that 'the previous one' at 271c8–d3 refers not to the age of Cronus, but to the reverse cycle immediately previous to ours, where people were also born from the earth (Brisson [n. 5, 1995], 354, n. 15) rather strained. For, when put in context, 271c8–d3 is said as an answer to the Young Socrates' question about the age of Cronus (cf. 271c3–d1), and the text will continue narrating such an age (271d ff.).

<sup>39</sup> We should take in like manner the allusion to the age of Cronus as 'contrary' (*ἐναντία*) to

The Stranger then proceeds to ask which of the two ages was happier, whether that of Cronus or ‘this [life] which is said to be in the presence of Zeus (ἐπὶ Διός)’, which is ‘the [life] of the present era (τὸν νυνὶ)’ (272b1–4). The suggestion that we are living under god matches our claim that this period is one of those in which the universe is not just left to itself, and this will again be supported below.

##### 5. *Reversal after the age of Cronus: increasing cosmic disorder and reversal of ageing*

Now, if our interpretation above is correct, and both the ages of Cronus and of Zeus go in a forward direction, we still need to postulate a reverse cycle between them, to follow the cosmic structure of opposite cycles presented at 2. The text in fact goes on smoothly to present this reverse cycle at 272d6–273d4. There the Stranger describes what happens at the end of the age of Cronus:

when the time of all these things was finished, and change was due to come about, and moreover all the earthborn race had by that time been consumed, since each soul had given all its births by falling into the earth as seed as many times as had been assigned for each, then *the pilot of the universe so to speak released the tiller and went off to his place of outlook, so that fated and inborn desire turned the universe backwards* (πάλιν ἀνέστρεφεν) (272d6–e6)

This reverse cycle is characterized by initial cosmic convulsion and ‘another’ (ἄλλην) destruction of animals (273a3–4)—parallel to the destruction of animals occurring at the beginning of the reverse cycle described at II.3, cf. 270c11–12; restoration of order for the very briefest period after the release (273a5–7, c5–6),<sup>40</sup> and then increasing cosmic disorder which results in the danger of the destruction of the universe (273d3–4). And it is when the universe is on the brink of destruction that god intervenes to start a new era.

Typically, scholars have supposed that this reverse cycle immediately following the age of Cronus belongs to our age of Zeus (which is described at greater length at 273e6–274e1). However, we should note, first, that the text refers to the reverse cycle following the age of Cronus as completely in the past, as we learn from the remark that, with regard to the universe’s remembering the teachings of its father, ‘at the

our present ‘revolution and generation’ at 274e10–11, which is made in a context meant to emphasize and contrast the shepherding fulfilled by god at that time and the—more modest—political care carried out by humans in the present epoch.

<sup>40</sup> Rowe (n. 6), 13 in fact suggests that the last two circumstances described (respectively the convulsion and the restoration of order) occur in two opposite cycles: the first one would depict the reversal following the golden rule of Cronus and the second would mark the start of *our new, present cycle*, the ‘age of Zeus’. The latter would, according to Rowe, go in the same direction as the golden period (see also Rowe [n. 18], 21); the difference is that, instead of being ruled by god, the universe would follow the rule of its own intelligence (φρόνησις). This interpretation postulates, then, two successive periods when the universe marches by itself (without god) in opposite directions; something, however, that seems precluded by 269e7 ff., which precisely denies, among various possibilities, that the universe should turn itself in opposite directions. In addition, Rowe’s justification for his postulating not only a reverse, but also a forward cycle without god, namely that if the universe ‘always went in the reverse direction when left to itself, its claim to rationality [φρόνησις] would look weak’, is unconvincing. For, while it is true that the bodily determines the *direction* of the motion of the universe in the reverse cycle (as he himself notes)—that is, its ἀνάπαλιν ἵέναι, 269d2 ff.—we must also note that the world’s intelligence is mentioned there specifically in the context of the cycles which move opposite to those of god’s guidance, and its relevance is to explain the *circularity* of its motion (περιμάγεται ζῶον ὃν καὶ φρόνησιν ἐλλήχως, 269c9–d2)—at least as far as the beginning of the reverse cycle is concerned, when memory of god’s teaching is still fresh.

beginning it did so more accurately, towards the end more dimly' (κατ' ἀρχὰς μὲν οὖν ἀκριβέστερον ἀπετέλει, τελευτῶν δὲ ἀμβλύτερον, 273b2–3).

This circumstance, I claim, is not accidental, nor a simple manner of speaking. For we can also see that it is to this reverse cycle that we should attribute (as to the one at II.3) a reversal of the ageing process so that humans and other animals grow younger rather than older. Indeed, at 273e we are told that, when the universe was turned along the road towards its present generation (meaning the present age of Zeus), that 'produced new things opposite to the ones before. For those animals which were almost due to disappear through smallness grew larger, and those bodies newly born from the earth with grey hair again died and descended to the earth' (ε7–11). In this latter sentence the new things of this cycle are contraposed to those happening before: the normal present process of growth is contrasted with the previous growing smaller and disappearing; as to the second clause, the text cannot mean that the earthborn belong to this period (for that is ruled out at 274a2–4), but they must belong to the previous age, following on the above mentioned contraposition.<sup>41</sup>

This means, then, that in the period previous to the age of Zeus animals were growing younger. And this situation again contrasts with the age of Cronus where, as we have seen from the image of the seed (272e3), the ageing process of the earthborn goes from young to old, like a plant, as does the ageing process in the age of Zeus (cf. 273e8–9, 274a—with the reference to conception, birth and nurture). If this is so, then we have earthborn not only in the forward age of Cronus but also—of a different kind—in the following reversal, which must be distinguished from the present age of Zeus.<sup>42</sup>

#### 6. Forward cycle: the age of Zeus. The appendix of the myth and the case against

Let us then see how the text describes what happens when the universe is on the brink of destruction, in the cycle following the release of its control by god. We are told that at that very moment

<sup>41</sup> Thus, it would not be surprising to find this kind of earthborn immediately before the age of Zeus (270e) after we saw a similar kind of earthborn in a similarly regressive cycle described in the myth previous to the age of Cronus (270d–e). Brisson (n. 5, 1995), 352, for his part, has suggested that this could equally well refer to the cycle preceding our age—so that there might be no reverse cycle preceding the age of Cronus—since in both cases the direction is the same. In this way, Brisson's picture only has three cycles: age of Cronus, reversal, age of Zeus (ibid. 353, 358–60). While this idea is not implausible, the talk about 'another' (ἄλλην) destruction of animals at 273a3 seems instead to suggest that the latter is different from the one mentioned at 270c11–12, thus making the two reverse cycles distinct. This interpretation is in turn reinforced if we take 271b4 as marking a temporal transition between the reversal of ageing and the age of Cronus that follows (see above, II.4.1). Now, if the age of Cronus is preceded by a reverse cycle, the latter must in turn be preceded by a forward cycle, when god would impart the circular motion to the universe that it then preserves for some time (cf. above, n. 40), and when animals would be created that would then get destroyed in the reversal mentioned at 270c11. This would render a picture of at least five cosmic cycles: (i) creation of the universe by god ordering it (cf. above, II.1); (ii) reversal (cf. above, II.3); (iii) age of Cronus (cf. above, II.4); (iv) reversal (as analysed in this section); (v) age of Zeus.

<sup>42</sup> In the light of this, we can also give an explanation of the passage 271a7–b1, where we are told that the earthborn 'were remembered by our first ancestors, who were neighbours to the end of the previous cycle during the succeeding time'. The earthborn which are recalled here by our ancestors need not be those of the age of Cronus but must most likely be those of our immediately previous—reverse—cycle.

god who ordered the universe, seeing that it was in trouble, and worried lest, having been storm-tossed and dissolved by confusion, it should sink into the limitless sea of dissimilarity, *sits back again at his tiller*, and after *turning* (στρέψας) what was sick and dissolute in the previous period when the world was by itself, he *puts it in order* (κοσμεῖ) and, *setting it right again* (ἐπανορθῶν), *makes it* (ἀπεργάζεται) *immortal and ageless*. (273d4–e4)

The action of god sitting back again at the tiller suggests the start of a new forward cycle, since his absence from the tiller was characteristic of the opposite period after the age of Cronus (272e4 ff.). In addition, god is here said to restore the world's immortality (cf. ἀθάνατον αὐτὸν καὶ ἀγήρων ἀπεργάζεται, 273e3–4), something that characterizes god's action in the—forward—period when he guides the universe, as we learn from 270a3–5: 'Sometimes the universe is guided by a different, divine cause, acquiring life again and receiving restored immortality (λαμβάνοντα ἀθανασίαν ἐπισκευαστήν) from its creator; at other times it is let go.'

Now, contrary to the standard view,<sup>43</sup> I think we can preserve the consistency of the text if we take all this description to allude to the start of our present age of Zeus (cf. ἐπὶ Διός, τὸν νυνὶ at 272b2–3). This, as we have seen, is confirmed by the assertion that god turned round (στρέψας 273e3) all that was sick in the *previous* period (προτερᾷ περιόδῳ) that the world underwent 'by itself' (καθ' ἑαυτὸν, 273e2); an expression that recalls the similar 'through itself' (δι' ἑαυτοῦ) used to characterize the march of the universe in reverse cycles at 270a5. And the text immediately goes on to say that the universe 'is turned' (στροφέντος) along the road towards its present generation (τὴν ἐπὶ τὴν νῦν γένεσιν ὁδόν, 273e6–7), which suggests that this was indeed done by the very action of the god who turned it (στρέψας) at 273e3.<sup>44</sup> Thus, we should read the passage that follows (273e–274e) as continuous with this one and within the age of Zeus.

All that said, we might still be struck by the description that follows, which as a matter of fact seems to suggest that we are *not* under divine care, in a way that would appear to support the prevalent view we oppose. For the text continues to describe the hardships that humans had to encounter at the beginning of this cycle, 'deprived of

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. Skemp (n. 3), 114 and Cornford (n. 3), 207, who take the return of god to the helm as a description of an event that is still to come. On Rowe's interpretation, the return will mark the beginning of a new age of Cronus, which he takes as following directly our present period as one of god's absence, both these periods, however, having the same—forward—direction. (Cf. Rowe [n. 6], 13, 197 *ad* 274c1–2.) But this description does not sit well with the overall structure of cosmic cycles presented in the myth, according to which periods of god's guidance are always in the opposite direction to periods of god's absence (cf. above section II.2).

<sup>44</sup> One possible objection deserves mentioning. After describing the god as turning the universe and making it immortal at 273e3–4, the Stranger remarks: 'This has been said as the end of everything. And as regards the demonstration of the king, it is sufficient for us to grasp the account from before' (273e4–6). To this he adds: 'For when, moreover, the universe was turned along the road towards its present generation, the age came again to a stop, and produced new things opposite to the ones before' (e6–8). The fact that at 273e4–6 the Stranger suggests going back in the description might be taken to hint that his further allusion to our present era at e6–8 means to insert it in a period previous to god's returning to the universe at 273e3–4 (in which case the universe could have been turned back simply by its own 'fated and innate desire', cf. 272e6). Yet this conclusion needn't follow. Instead, I take the Stranger's invitation to start from before as simply alluding to the reversal of the ageing process in the cycle immediately previous to ours: this is indeed confirmed by the lines to follow, which talk about bodies due to disappear, and born from the earth with grey hair, before the situation is reversed to the present one (cf. 273e6–11). And the motivation he may have for starting the account from that point is to establish a contrast between our cycle and the preceding cycles (both forward and reverse) in the history of the universe, where living beings sprang from the earth (as γηγενεῖς) so that there was no place for human conception and presumably rearing (cf. 274a).

the care of the god that possessed and tended us' (274b5–6). As an answer to this challenge, Brisson remarks that the point of the passage is to indicate that, 'contrary to the age of Cronus, we are no longer tended by daemons' or lesser gods. According to Brisson, we can understand the age of Zeus as one where god still takes care of the revolution of the whole universe, even though we no longer have secondary deities taking charge of their respective regions.<sup>45</sup>

Now, to say that in the present cycle we are deprived of the care of the regional gods, but not of the overall care exerted by god in the universe, can in principle make sense of the greater part of the text of the myth, 269c–273e, and the actual suggestions of god's care in our era. However, the appendix can also be seen to contain some counter-evidence for this kind of interpretation. Let us quote the most challenging text in that direction:

And everything that contributed to human life arose from those things, once the care of the gods, as has now been said, left humans, and they had to lead their own existence and take care of themselves by themselves (*δι' ἑαυτῶν*), like the whole cosmos (*καθάπερ ὅλος ὁ κόσμος*), which we imitate and follow for the whole time . . . (274d2–7)<sup>46</sup>

According to this, it would be hard to say that only humans are deprived of their caring gods but not the universe; the text just quoted rather suggests the contrary (and might even remind us of the 'care and rule'—*ἐπιμέλεια καὶ κράτος*—that the universe has of itself 'by itself' at the beginning of the reverse cycle at 273a7, cf. 270a5). Now, to this one could certainly reply that the text establishes an analogy between human beings and the cosmos only in respect of the care of themselves that they have to have, not in respect of their being left by the gods.<sup>47</sup> However, it also seems fair to suppose that there must be some kind of symmetry between the situation of parts of the universe and the universe itself, particularly if one follows closely the macro-microcosm parallelism emphasized throughout the myth.

This apparent difficulty, however, is eased when we put those passages in context. For after all it is not said that the gods withdraw every sort of care, not even for human beings, but only that of each of the gods 'tending us' (*νέμοντος ἡμᾶς* 274b5) during the age of Cronus (cf. 271d6b–e1). The gods are still present as bestowers of gifts like the arts (*technai*) to humanity, which are granted together with the 'necessary teaching' (*διδασχῆς*) and education (*παιδείσεως*)' (274c6–7).<sup>48</sup> *Didachê* was exactly the kind of thing given by god in the periods when he guides the universe and which the latter has to remember when left to its own (cf. 273b2). Indeed, the presence of lesser gods must imply the presence of a ruling god, since we read at 272e ff. that, no god being at the helm of the universe, there are no longer lesser gods having intervention. So, if the gods are still present, though more detachedly, in the present era by giving us gifts, teaching and education oriented towards facilitating a more independent life on the part of human beings, one should expect god to be in charge of the universe with a

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Brisson (n. 5, 1995), 351–2 and 360.

<sup>46</sup> M. Erler, 'Kommentar zu Brisson und Dillon', in Rowe (n. 3), 375–80 at 377 presses this passage against Brisson.

<sup>47</sup> After all even at 273c2–3, referring to a forward cycle, it is the universe *its* self which breeds the living beings, *with the assistance* of the pilot. Furthermore, one should note that the caring role of god in the overall description of the forward cycles is never overstated. For we literally read that god 'co-guides and helps the universe revolve as it goes' (*συμποδηγεί πορευόμενον καὶ συνκυκλεῖ* 269c5; cf. *ὅπ' ἄλλης συμποδηγείσθαι θείας αἰτίας* 270a3), which suggests that god is the helper of the universe's motion rather than the sole agent of it.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Brisson (n. 5, 1995), 350.

similar function. Going back to 274d2–7, then, ‘what has left humans’ as much as the universe is not divine care altogether but only the close divine care that they used to have in the era of Cronus. If this is so, then it makes perfect sense to read that:

In the same way as the cosmos had been ordered to be the master of its own march (*καθάπερ τῷ κόσμῳ προσετέτακτο αὐτοκράτορα εἶναι τῆς αὐτοῦ πορείας*), so and similarly were the parts ordered to conceive, procreate and breed by themselves so far as it was possible, by similar guidance. (274a4–b1)

In this passage, the notions of divine guidance and instruction are again emphasized but portrayed as oriented towards making the universe and us more autonomous. We find a similar situation in the *Timaeus* when the Demiurge instructs (again, the verb *προσάττειν*, 36d4–7) the heavens how to move; this seems to be what the heavenly bodies learn (38e6) and they continue doing so even after, according to the mythical literal picture, the Demiurge ceases his direct work on the universe, and the World-Soul and the heavenly bodies have to take up ruling functions in it (41a ff., 42d–e; cf. 34c4–5), so that the universe’s orderly foundations end up being much more internal to it than the external figure of the Demiurge initially suggested.

Why this emphasis on the more autonomous character of the whole universe and its parts in the era of Zeus in the *Politicus*? The whole idea this appendix seems to convey is that the present era of Zeus, by contrast with the earlier era of Cronus, is not characterized by such a great divine care that would prevent the existence of politics and humans being their own rulers. As we shall see shortly, Plato seems to be willing to suggest here that politics takes place neither in an ideal universe where god’s *nous* would have that kind of power, nor in its opposite under the predominance of necessity (*anankê*), but in our *actual* world where *nous* and necessity coexist. Perhaps that is why in this era there are wild beasts, the weather is cold enough that humans require fire (274b–c), and so on.<sup>49</sup> As Brisson has proposed, we can think of this era as a *synthesis* between the ideal order of the age of Cronus and the disorder that is depicted as prevailing in the reverse cycles,<sup>50</sup> in the same manner as in the *Timaeus* our actual world is said to be a synthesis (*σύντασις*) of *nous* and *anankê* (47e–48a). And this circumstance would in turn explain why in the appendix to the myth of the *Politicus* we find such apparent tension between passages reminiscent of the reverse cycles on the one hand and passages suggestive of the opposite situation on the other.

But, just as in the *Timaeus* *nous* still rules over *anankê* and prevails within the composition of the *kosmos* (47e–48a), here again we should think that god rules, since he is still at the helm of the universe (273e1), and exercises guidance (*ἀγωγή*, 274b1). He also gives orders to the universe (cf. *προσάττειν* at 274a5 and a7), even though the universe is ordered to be independent (274a5). This suggests an active role for god and not just a passive one as in those reverse periods when he withdraws his hand from the helm (and literally leaves or abandons the universe, 269c5, 270a5–6), limiting himself, at the very most, to observing what is happening from his place of outlook (272e). The

<sup>49</sup> Note however that these are just *terrestrial* shortcomings—in the same way as *anankê* manifests itself mainly in the *Timaeus* at a terrestrial level (cf. 73b–74b, 75a–b), which can be subsumed in the overall guidance or *ἀγωγή* that I shall mention. There is here no suggestion of the astronomical disorder that characterizes the periods without guidance of god, and which would mean the *governance* of the bodily or of *anankê* over the whole universe (*Pol.* 273c–d). The latter—though not the former—seems incompatible with intelligent design, as we can see from the *Philebus* (28d–e), *Timaeus* (46c–e, 47e–48a), and *Laws* (10.888e ff. with 891c–892a, 12.966e–967a).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Brisson (n. 5, 1974), 490–2.



same active role of the deity is suggested by the allusion to the *gifts* of the gods (such as fire, skills, and seeds) at 274c5–d2, who come and help the defenceless condition of humans, giving the necessary ‘teaching and education’ (274c6–7),<sup>51</sup> in a way that is not so close to royal shepherding, but still provident enough and far from the passive role of god in the reversions. God is then present even though we are said to be deprived of the guidance of the particular gods who used to tend us in different parts of the universe (274b5–6 and d3–4, cf. 271d–e),<sup>52</sup> something that is, however, crucial to allow for politics in the sense of humans guiding themselves.

We see, then, that the structure of the forward cycles is not repetitive.<sup>53</sup> The age of Cronus depicts an ideal situation which contrasts with the real one. And it is important that these two ages, while both being ages of god, should have different characteristics in the context of the whole dialogue, since in the light of them Plato will criticize the first definition of the statesman given before the myth—that is, shepherd as breeder of human bipeds or the human flock<sup>54</sup> (a characterization which rather belonged to god in the apolitical era of Cronus)<sup>55</sup>—and put forward a new one in the light of the myth: statesmanship in terms of human concern, the latter being more adjusted to the facts (cf. 274e–275a, 276c–d).

At the same time, the advent of *technai* during the age of Zeus helps to present not only the need for politics as a *technê*, but the plurality of competitors with which it will have to deal when claiming to be an art of concern for humans (after all, farming and cobbling also show concern), and thus invites a further reflection (undertaken at 287b ff.) about what exact kind of concern is distinctive of politics by contrast with other arts and pseudo-arts. It also invites methodological reflection on what is the kind of measurement that makes an art a proper art (284d ff., 286d–e).<sup>56</sup> On a cosmological plane, however, we can see how the myth shows us the genesis of the arts themselves: for the arts are born out of our need for resourcefulness, which tries to impose order upon chaotic tendencies, and resourcefulness—as opposed to being in trouble, *ἄπορος*, cf. 274c5—is the kind of thing which one needs in an imperfect universe due to the restraints imposed by *anankê*: thus, the need for humans to organize themselves would be an example of those limitations (cf. *ἀναγκάζειν*, 274c4). In this regard, the way in which (under this interpretation) *nous* prevails over *anankê* on a cosmic scale in our cycle functions as a point of reference for humans if they are to be themselves teleological agents striving to create a political *kosmos*.

If so, god would still function as an exemplar for the politician to follow, and maybe this is at the back of the Stranger’s mind when later claiming that the myth was framed in order to provide a paradigm for the king (277b3–5). Even the age of Cronus,

<sup>51</sup> Rowe (n. 6), 197 *ad* 274c6 admits that ‘it is surprising to find gods giving gifts to us human beings’ in a period when according to him we are not under god. On my interpretation, that there is a divine presence in this period, the giving of such gifts is no longer surprising.

<sup>52</sup> Note the plural ‘gods’ (*θεῶν*) at 274d3 and the ‘daemon tending us’ (*νέμοντος ἡμᾶς δαίμονος*) at 274b5–6 probably being a reference to each of the daemons (*δαίμονες*) who tended (*ἐνεμεν*) (us as) a particular kind of flock during the age of Cronus at 271d6–e1.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Brisson (n. 5, 1995), 361.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. 267d, where politics was said to be an art of tendance or collective nurture (*νομευτική, κοινοτροφική*) concerned with the human flock (*ἀγέλη*).

<sup>55</sup> Cf. particularly 271d6–e1, where the animals are divided by *flocks* among gods who tended them, and the allusion to people under Cronus as his nurslings (*τρόφιοι*) at 272b8.

<sup>56</sup> See on this Rowe (n. 6), 198–9; and especially Lane (n. 6), 118–19, with a clear enumeration of the various methodological flaws that the myth comes to denounce, thus paving the ground for further treatments in the dialogue.

removed as it is from us, can prove inspiring, insofar as it invites us to recreate, so far as possible, its ideal environmental conditions.<sup>57</sup> But it will now have to be the politician who will be mostly in charge of bringing about that state of affairs. He will do so, however, not by removing the need for the arts, as would appear to be the case in the age of Cronus, but by using the help of all the other arts and thus providing people with the desirable external conditions (such as proper food and shelter) that make the flourishing of the state possible.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, he will leave a certain autonomy in the field of each art and among its citizens, thus allowing for differences between them while interweaving them,<sup>59</sup> just as in the era of Zeus the universe itself is autonomous and promotes autonomy among its members while at the same time encouraging collaboration.<sup>60</sup>

And while the degree to which we are left to ourselves is larger in this era, we are still reminded that happiness is something to be achieved by humans—as opposed to something merely given to us—even in the most idealized era of humanity. For it is clear that in the age of Cronus the mere existence of favourable external conditions is not sufficient for humans to qualify as ‘happier’ than those of our time. Instead, it is the exercise of philosophy and the pursuit of dialogue for the sake of the acquisition of wisdom that will make them happier (272c);<sup>61</sup> but since this is stated as a possibility even for the nurslings of Cronus, autonomy is something that god would not want to eliminate altogether from humans even in that idyllic age. In this regard, the contrast between the ages of Cronus and Zeus becomes less sharp, and the invitation to philosophize (external conditions ideal or not) a key moral message of the story.<sup>62</sup> But

<sup>57</sup> I have argued for the exemplarity of the age of Cronus in Carone (n. 11). Pace Lane (n. 6), 120–2, who basically believes that the myth (and god in it) fails as an example.

<sup>58</sup> And for how the support of the universe is needed in this regard cf. above, n. 15 *in fine*. Note that not only the satisfaction of external needs but even some leisure time through the existence of play will later on be presented as an indispensable means towards the happiest state (287b ff., 288c, 311c); and in this regard as well the age of Cronus can prove paradigmatic for a political search in our age.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. 287b ff., 304a–311c.

<sup>60</sup> But this collaboration is in turn reminiscent, in a more effortful manner, of the way in which all parts of the universe were in charge of different divinities effortlessly following the one design of the major god in the Golden Age (271d–e).

<sup>61</sup> Is the suggestion that philosophy is necessary but not sufficient for happiness (if we take the ideal external conditions of the age of Cronus to play a role after all)? This conclusion need not follow. For when claiming that the nurslings of Cronus were a million times happier if they pursued philosophy (272c), the Stranger need not put that difference merely in terms of their greater enjoyment of externals: indeed, the very possibility of philosophy for the many, if exercised, would contrast starkly with the way in which the great majority of people lead their lives in our time (τῶν νῦν, 272c5; and remember the *Politicus*’ subsequent complaints about how institutions *now* [301d–e] do not facilitate the flourishing of the best state of affairs). On the other hand, the text is also consistent with the view that enjoyment of externals may be a bonus for (and thus make ‘happier’) a life that could be ‘happy’ without them, or even to some degree necessary for whoever is to lead her life philosophically. If so, the myth need not contradict the Sufficiency Thesis that virtue—or in this case, philosophy—is sufficient for happiness; for a similar issue in the *Laws*, see G. R. Carone, ‘Pleasure, virtue, externals and happiness in Plato’s *Laws*’, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 19 (2002), 327–344, and for a different view, see T. Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>62</sup> As I have argued in Carone (n. 11). This image is also suggestive in another way, insofar as it shows that it is possible to lead a philosophical life in which ‘philosophy’ is conceived not as a profession but as an attitude of dialogue grounding happiness which has strong Socratic resonances (cf. *Ap.* 41b–c). Pace Owen (n. 15), 332–5, who sees in divine shepherding an echo of the kind of rule that characterizes the philosopher-ruler in the *Republic*, when such rule, as has

if so, then the equation autonomy–godlessness (which so often lies behind the traditional interpretation) dissolves:<sup>63</sup> not only do we see contrasts, but also parallelisms between the ages of Cronus and Zeus, as we would expect if, after all, the two ages run in the same direction. Thus, the point about autonomy turns out to be more complex than it seems: on the level of political autonomy, it is true that the politician must be a human rather than a god; on the level of individual autonomy, however, the age of Cronus is no exception to the suggestion that the best form of life is something that the person must choose for herself.<sup>64</sup>

If things are as I am arguing, it appears that the traditional interpretation has tended to take the myth and its two main cycles pretty much upside down: on the one hand, it has committed us (people under Zeus) to a cosmic era of inevitable march towards chaos which seems to preclude the possibility, however remote in the future, of the rise of, or advance towards, the best kind of politics that the rest of the dialogue

been generally recognized, seems to doom the larger part of the population to heteronomy. In this regard, the possibility of a ‘philosophical’ mode of life for the mass of people under intelligent rule in the era of Cronus, and of their learning from a distinctively gifted individual (272c1–4) may foreshadow the *Politicus*’ further suggestions on the divine bonds of true opinion (309c5–e8) that the large body of citizens will be able to receive under the rule of the knowledgeable statesman. These, by appealing to reason as a divine or immortal element is us (309c1–3), and by being accompanied by stability, must, as Bobonich has argued (C. Bobonich, ‘The virtues of ordinary people in Plato’s *Statesman*’, in Rowe [n. 3], 313–29 at 322–3), involve some reasoned understanding rather than uncritical acceptance of what one is told. By understanding securely what is best in unison and acting accordingly (309b–e, 310e), these citizens would be letting divine reason rule in them not only from without, but also from within. Thus, this very race of citizens is itself said to be daemonic (δαμόνιον) and possess a divine (θεία) quality (309c). This, in turn, seems to be an internalization of the mythical picture of the *daimones* exerting close provincial care in the age of Cronus (271d).

<sup>63</sup> Pace Gill (n. 3), 156, who talks of Cronus as having ‘complete control’ over his nurslings; Lane (n. 6), 10, who treats the latter as a ‘tame and unthinking population’ and the ‘contrast between the age of Kronos and the age of Zeus’ as one ‘between the life of heteronomy and the life of autonomy’ (113); similarly McCabe (n. 6), 237. While McCabe acknowledges that ‘in both eras, philosophy is apparently possible’ (160), she contends that ‘the nurslings of Cronus *would* be happy if they could pursue philosophy’ (her italics), but they can’t. Yet the text contains none of the counterfactual language in which McCabe puts her point. Rather, it says quite plainly (in the indicative) that if the nurslings of Cronus used their leisure and other external conditions for the sake of philosophy, ‘it is easy to decide (εύκριτον) that they *were* immensely happier than those of now’ (272c4–5). Thus, it is not the *possibility* of philosophy but its *realization* that is left open-ended; the possibility itself is taken for granted. See also below, note 64.

<sup>64</sup> And even on this issue, I contend that my interpretation of the structure of cosmic cycles makes the best sense of the text, as the opposite interpretation fails to account for how the age of Cronus would leave open to its nurslings the possibility of growing in wisdom (272c4) if after all they become younger and therefore eventually less knowledgeable. Pace McCabe (n. 6), 160, who however grants that ‘the process of ageing is seen, outside the myth, as a process of becoming wise’ (ibid.). The fact that the text says at 272a2–3 that ‘all returned to life from the earth, not remembering the previous [events]’ need not be taken to suggest, as McCabe does (n. 6, 160), that in the age of Cronus there was no memory at all. The passage may simply be referring to people not remembering their past lives (something that may be true of any state of rebirth or reincarnation). And 270e7, suggesting that people become children in soul, refers, on my reading, not to the age of Cronus (as McCabe takes it) but to the cycle immediately opposite to Cronus: see above, section II.3. Indeed, the growing younger of the old (as a microcosmic reflection of the universe at large) seems to fit much better in a universe which is moving towards the increasing rule of the corporeal, as we can see also from *Tim.* 43a–b, where the infant soul manifests erratic and disorderly motions which are identical to the six rectilinear motions of *anankē* without the rule of *nous*; compare this in turn with the original state of *ataxia* before the cosmic order is created at *Pol.* 273b6.

wants.<sup>65</sup> On the other, it has more than once equated autonomy with godlessness to the point of denying or ignoring that even in a god-reared universe happiness is something that belongs to the individual; it has made people in the era of Cronus go backwards in age in a way that prevents the explicit possibility, as allowed in the text, of their growing in wisdom (272c4);<sup>66</sup> and thus it has missed important ways in which the myth, albeit helping refine and criticize the previous definition of the statesman by differentiating ideal from real conditions, may show a god-driven universe as paradigmatic for a political search.

### III. CONCLUSION

In sum, by following the movement of the text, I hope to have offered a coherent reading of the letter of the myth of the *Politicus* according to which the present cycle in which we are living is an orderly one under the care of god and not one of increasing cosmic disorder, as has usually been assumed at the cost of charging Plato with unsolvable contradictions. Our present cycle proved parallel and not opposite to that of Cronus in respect of direction, even though some differences can be found in other senses and are indeed required for Plato to be able to make his political point by means of the myth at all. In this way I hope to have shown that, even on a literal reading of the text, the Mind of god can still be regarded as the foundation of the present cosmic order, so that in this respect the *Politicus* picture need not conflict with similar claims in other dialogues.

Furthermore, we have seen how it is crucial that our historical dimension should not (*pace* the standard reading) be one of increasing—cosmic and human—deterioration, but a forward one, yet distinct from the age of Cronus, if we are to take the statesman of the third definition as a practicable human ideal towards which we can progress, and thus make sense of the dialogue's message that one should strive for the ideal constitution or at least try to imitate it as best one can (297a–c, 300e–301a). Precisely in this respect, the Stranger complains that the many 'do not trust that anyone worthy of such government could ever arise, willing and able to distribute rightly what's just and pious to everyone by ruling with virtue and knowledge' (301c–d). If, then, Plato in the *Politicus* is no pessimist about politics,<sup>67</sup> I hope to have shown in this essay how a proper reading of the cosmic cycles in the myth provides the larger framework against

<sup>65</sup> Note in this regard 297b7–c2, and especially 301c6–d6, where the Stranger remarks that the ideal statesman does not arise *now* among us (possibly because there is not, unlike the case of a queen bee in a hive, a social matrix to support it), but does seem to allow for the possibility of its realization (presumably in a more distant time) by complaining about the disbelief of the many. See above, pp. 88–91, and especially G. Vlastos, 'Socratic knowledge and Platonic "pessimism"', *Philosophical Review* 66 (1957), 226–238 at 235–7 for a lucid discussion of *Pol.* 301c ff. My point applies also if one takes it, as Rowe at one place suggests (n. 10, 237), that 'the figure of the ideal statesman, someone completely knowledgeable and competent to exercise judgement in all important spheres, is to serve as a standard, to which we must approximate as nearly as we can' (ibid. 237). For even this view presupposes the possibility of human political progress, which I have argued makes better sense if inscribed in a forward cosmic cycle.

<sup>66</sup> See above, n. 64. Alternatively, it has made the people under Zeus go backwards in age, equally precluding the possibility of intellectual growth: see above, section I and n. 30. But note that even Brisson (n. 38) reads the age of Cronus as one devoid of philosophy. And in this he is with a number of other commentators who endorse the traditional reading, such as Scodel (n. 3), 79.

<sup>67</sup> See above, n. 64.

which one can understand why it is reasonable for us (as the imperfectly governed people living in the age of Zeus) to have hope.<sup>68</sup>

*University of Colorado at Boulder*

GABRIELA ROXANA CARONE  
carone@buffmail.colorado.edu

I wish to thank an anonymous referee and David Sedley, Richard Sorabji, and Raphael Woolf for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.