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AN ECHO OF GRACE: PLATO'S DOCTRINE OF GIFTS | PATRICK HARMON

The interpreter that undertakes to compare the works of Plato with the gospel must begin somewhere. Here I attempt to set out Plato's view on gifts and divine dispensation, and would ask that you consider the two following texts:

"And this [grace] is a gift from God; not from you nor your deeds, so that no one should boast."

*Ephesians 2:8–9*¹

"Then according to our argument, *Meno*, it appears that if we become virtuous, we do so through a gift from the gods."

Meno 100b2–3, cf., 99e4--100a3²

Recognizing the similarity between these two passages depends on an understanding of Plato's deep and abiding interest in education (παιδεία). This interest echoes throughout all his work, and although it should be



THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS (1509-1511) BY RAPHAEL

admitted that he sharpens the focus in certain dialogues more than in others (e.g., *Meno*, *Republic*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and *Laws*), it is not difficult to draw out observations and teachings that concern παιδεία from all his texts. Comprehensive exegesis on the topic would overrun the bounds of the space permitted to me here, but a general sense of the matter can be achieved with a few judiciously selected texts.

I am interested in pointing out some similarities between the gospel doctrine of grace and gifts and Plato's philosophy for various reasons, but most generally in the hope of coming to a greater understanding of God's sovereign rule. It is my opinion that Greek philosophy helped to prepare the ground where the seed of the gospel was to be sown.³ That is to say that the gospel message fell on ears that were in significant ways primed to receive it, and was articulated in concepts and categories already familiar to them. Plato's propositions concerning education, of which the notion of gifts plays an important part, derive

1. Καὶ τοῦτο οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν, Θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον· οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων, ἵνα μὴ τις καυχῆσθαι.

2. Here are the two texts: *Meno* 100b2–3: Ἐκ μὲν τοίνυν τούτου τοῦ λογισμοῦ, ὃ Μένων, θεία μοῖρα ἡμῖν φαίνεται παραγιννομένη ἢ ἀρετὴ οἷς ἂν παραγίγηται; 99e5--100a1: ἀρετὴ ἂν εἴη οὔτε φύσει οὔτε διδακτόν, ἀλλὰ θεία μοῖρα παραγιννομένη ἄνευ νοῦ οἷς ἂν παραγίγηται; and cf. *Republic* 418e4–6. These translations and the ones that follow are my own. Scriptural passages rely on the Nestle-Aland critical text *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993). The passages from Plato rely on various Oxford critical texts: *Platonis Opera*, in 5 vols., ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903); with the exceptions of R. S. Bluck's critical edition of *Meno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961); and S. R. Slings' edition of *Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

3. This is not an original idea by any stretch of the imagination. Tertullian was one of the first to ask "what has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" (*De praescriptione haereticorum*, chap. 7), and since then many authors have vigorously pursued the question. I would recommend two recent works on the subject: see George Karamanolis' *The Philosophy of Early Christianity* (Slough: Acumen Publishing Ltd, 2013), which also contains a helpful bibliography; and also the winsome work of Abraham J. Malherbe in the collection of essays in *Light From the Gentiles: Hellenistic Philosophy and Early Christianity*, ed. Carl R. Holladay, John T. Fitzgerald, Gregory E. Sterling, and James W. Thompson (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

from natural philosophy. Of course the gospel's doctrine of grace is not revealed in the same way; yet Plato's account of gifts and what we might construe as similar in some aspects to grace may be compared to the gospel's with some benefit, especially in the sense that one may see the preparatory providential hand of God at work in the development of key concepts that were certainly part of the cosmopolitan education of the Hellenized Mediterranean.

Plato's account of education is dependent on his more general account of human nature. Human beings have the capacity to be educated (*Republic* 518b--519b). The body of a human being can be "educated" in the sense that it can undergo training (*γυμνασία*), but Plato's pressing interest and the central focus of his account is the education of the soul (*ψύχη*). It seems to me that this primary interest precedes and gives rise to propositions or accounts (in both cases, *λόγοι*) that can summarize significant insights and conclusions that Plato reached. The following three propositions are on the order of conclusions. Through his study of both human nature and nature writ large, Plato established that:

- 1) Humanity is radically separated from the divine.
- 2) The law of the divine is written on the human heart.
- 3) The fundamental desire of the human heart is reconciliation with the divine.



THE FALL DEPICTED IN THE SISTINE CHAPEL BY MICHELANGELO

These propositions derive from empirical observation of worldly phenomena and by speculation concerning the antecedent causes of these phenomena. This is a method and paradigm common to human existence, and in its most rigorous application, constitutes the formalized practice of scientific investigation. We commonly understand this to be natural philosophy, or in Reformed terms, natural revelation. Plato's arguments for these propositions derive from his empirical experience, his study of nature, and his speculation concerning the causes (or perhaps single cause) that generate(s) the phenomena of nature.

I do not expect the Reformed to balk at any of these propositions. Those who wish to examine texts that establish these propositions should begin with the texts noted below.⁴

All three propositions are universal statements concerning human nature. Each and every human's condition is determined by these natural facts. There is no individual choice or special circumstance that

4. This note cites different texts offered in evidence for the propositions. The first proposition is established through study of Plato's accounts concerning the Forms and Love. Texts that focus on the Forms and are often cited can be found at *Republic* 504d--517e, 595c--599b; *Timaeus* 27c--29d, 51b--55c, 69a--d, 89d--90d; *Phaedo* 73a--83c, 100c--102a. The most significant text on Love can be found in *Symposium*. I highly recommend it in its entirety, but particularly the famous sequential speeches of Agathon 194e--198a and Diotima 201d--212c. Also see *Phaedrus* 244b--252c, which is also valuable as evidence for my argument. As to the third proposition, all of the texts mentioned above in this note can be taken in evidence. Among them the most concise texts to consider are *Timaeus* 89d--90d and *Symposium* 201d--212c.

will change their consequences in any way. Human beings are not free to do so.

Consider the first proposition, that humanity is radically separated from the divine. The sense of separation follows from Plato's famous distinction concerning the separate realms of the things that are and the things that are coming to be and passing away. The objects of human understanding are of two general types: the intelligible and the perceivable. The qualities of the two types are significant. The intelligible objects are none other than Plato's paradigms, variously translated as forms, models, or patterns (*παράδειγμα*) or the ideals (*ιδέας εἰδίοι*); and they are divine, immortal, immutable, immaterial, invisible, stable, predictable, orderly, good, etc.⁵ They are objects grasped only by the intellect (*νοῦς*). The perceivable objects, on the other hand, are grasped first by the five senses and then "processed" by the powers or capacities of the human soul in a complex system of manifold judgments, memory, imagination, and advanced reasoning. Of special note in regards to this division between types of being

is the corresponding distinction between knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*) and opinion (*δόξα*), and the consequences of that distinction. The intelligible, stable objects are objects of knowledge, while the objects of perception are the objects of opinions.⁶ If we have a human to examine, we have a material creature that inhabits a material realm constantly in flux, within

a manifold of sensible objects coming to be and passing away. The very furniture of human existence is unstable. The human cannot have certain reliable knowledge of the objects (including himself!) that surround him. He can only express opinions about them. The objects of knowledge, on the other hand, are not material. They are grasped by the mind through reason (*λόγος*), especially in the act of discovering and establishing the definitions of things. These intelligible objects have the quality of *being* in the fullest sense given their immutability. They are stable, predictable, and eternal. Conversely, the human experience, experienced as profoundly unstable and mortal, is fundamentally separated from divine things. The news of man's separation from the divine (fallenness) was not news to Plato.

As to the second proposition, that the law of the divine is written on the human heart, we see proof for this by comparing the orderly human life with its opposite. The orderly human life most often leads to happiness (*εὐδαιμονία*), generally construed as "living well." Happiness is an outcome of education that depends on a complex

5. Similar to the attributes of God mentioned in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* 2:1, 5: I--V, et al.

6. Knowledge is knowledge simply, with all the qualities mentioned. Opinion, however, comes in a variety of types; simple opinion, the sort of opinion that is newly formed and unexamined; right opinion (*ὀρθόδοξος*), the sort of opinion that accurately predicts outcomes and is the product of examination, study, instruction, and the like; and also belief or faith (*πίστις*). All of these (and the list is by no means complete) have as their objects things that are in flux, things that are coming to be and passing away.

set of necessary conditions; the most important of these is success in judgment--that is to say, managing well, hitting the mark (as opposed to missing it, i.e., ἡμαρτία, most often translated as “sin” in the Greek New Testament). This is particularly so in the context of managing an orderly household that is self-sufficient and produces orderly, educated citizens of the state; honoring and caring for one’s parents; managing the affairs of the city well, and benefitting its citizens; and behaving in a pious (εὐσεβής) manner. Such persons have wisdom (σοφία, φρόνησις, λόγος, etc.), and in this sense they are blessed (μακάριος). These types of persons will be rewarded in the afterlife, and in this case we see the sort of salvation that Plato describes.⁷ In this life and after one can be happy, but how one is happy is not up to the individual. Happiness is achieved by living in such a way that corresponds to the divine, moral pattern which informs every human heart. It is not an unstable pattern; and although Plato makes concessions, as he must, for individuation, he argues that one cannot be happy unless they willingly allow the lawful pattern to reign over their souls.⁸

On the other hand, the disorderly life, one that does not conform to the pattern, results in the opposite, i.e., wretchedness (κακία). The reason for the disorderly man’s wretchedness lies in the conflict between his actual behavior and the law written upon his heart; they are not consonant (συμφωνία, “in harmony”) with one another (*Timaeus* 89d--90d; *Laws* 652a--673a; this second citation is translated below).⁹ This dissonance operates in both a conscious and unconscious mode. Whether this dissonance results from some misguided line of reasoning or some disorderly, hidden desire (cf. *Republic* 439e--440a for an example), lack of harmony with the divine in the human soul leads to sin and wretchedness.

It is worth noting a particular aspect of Plato’s method that leads to this evaluation of happiness and wretchedness. First, Plato believes that a person’s happiness is observable in a reliable, scientific way; and therefore, if you wish to know how people become happy, then you observe and study happy people in order to discover both what qualities they most often possess (in terms of virtues), and how they come to possess them (education). The result of this extended investigation was a comprehensive, persuasive account of human nature accompanied by a prescription for education that helped shape western civilization. Importantly for our focus, the account is one that addresses uncertainty concerning choice and merit. What makes you happy is not the result of some free choice, but you are certainly responsible for fulfilling the necessary conditions for happiness that are dictated by human nature, all of which concur with the law written upon the heart. Human nature has a pattern, and those who are happy or blessed conform to that pattern.¹⁰

7. Cf., among others, “The Myth of Er,” in *Republic* 614b--621d; *Timaeus* 42a--d, 89d--90d; *Phaedo* 63e--68b.

8. I think the most succinct text available to us to establish proposition 2 is *Timaeus* 89d--90d (also mentioned in n4 above).

9. *Laws* 652a--673a is translated in n13 below.

10. The second proposition would be familiar to scholastic philosophers as the phenomenon of *synderesis*. An interesting and informative account can be found in Douglas Kries’ *Origen, Plato, and Conscience (Synderesis) in Jerome’s Ezekiel Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Taking up the third proposition requires a description of the education of the blessed. The matter can be put quite simply. The blessed human (1) has gifts and (2) the opportunity to develop those gifts. The consequence of this conjunction (which is in fact a wildly confused and unpredictable manifold of conjunctions) is that the separation between the divine and the individual is reduced; that the individual lives in accordance with the law written upon his heart; and that the desire for reconciliation is partially satisfied in this life (especially when one is able to contemplate divine objects without distraction) and a virtuous life is rewarded in the next. Such is the consequence of grace in the sense of divine dispensation (θεία μοίρα) or blessedness in the fullest sense one may find in Plato. The blessed are so because divine agency has granted them a set of innate gifts and has also granted them the circumstances in which those gifts may develop and thrive. Blessed people have a natural inclination for the good, the beautiful, the beneficial, etc.; but education is required to actualize their potential, and according to Plato, education consists of the process of turning them toward the correct things, the things worthy of study and veneration. It is an upward path, and as one travels that path one approaches divine things (*Republic* 514a--519b). The overwhelming force or cause

of this need to approach the divine is love (ἔρως, ἀγάπη, φιλία; *Symposium* 201d--212c).

HUMAN NATURE HAS
A PATTERN, AND
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Plato names a set of gifts that are necessary for correct education by means of lists found at several different locations in the corpus. These lists do not match exactly, but most include the following: a person who can be educated to blessedness is by nature (φύσις) retentive (μνήμων), intelligent (εὐμαθής), magnificent (μεγαλοπρεπής), and graceful (εὐχαρις). These natural capacities, when developed by the correct sort of education, may eventually result in the possession of the cardinal virtues: wisdom (σοφία), moderation (σωφροσύνη), courage (ἀνδρεία), and justice or righteousness (δικαιοσύνη).

A representative passage that includes such a list and emphasizes the language of necessity can be found at *Republic* 486e--487a. The exchange is between Socrates and Glaucon and comes towards the end of the description of the education of the philosopher kings.

(S) Does it seem to you that any of the things we’ve discussed are unnecessary or inimical for the soul intent on grasping Being adequately in the end?

(G) No, they are surely necessary.

(S) How can anyone criticize a practice like this, one that no one can pursue adequately unless he is by nature retentive, intelligent, magnificent, graceful, endeared and akin to the truth, justice, courage, and moderation.¹¹

11. *Republic* 486e1--487a5:

Τί οὖν; μή πη δοκοῦμέν σοι οὐκ ἀναγκαῖα ἕκαστα διεληλυθέναι καὶ ἐπόμενα ἀλλήλοις τῇ μελλούσῃ τοῦ ὄντος ἰκανῶς τε καὶ τελῶς ψυχή μεταλήψεσθαι;

Ἀναγκαῖότατα μὲν οὖν, ἔφη.

Ἔστιν οὖν ὅπη μέμνη τοιοῦτον ἐπιτηδεῦμα, ὃ μή ποτ’ ἄν τις οἶός τε γένοιτο ἰκανῶς ἐπιτηδεύσαι, εἰ μὴ φύσει εἴη μνήμων, εὐμαθής, μεγαλοπρεπής, εὐχαρις, φίλος τε καὶ συγγενής ἀληθείας, δικαιοσύνης, ἀνδρείας, σωφροσύνης;

cf. *Republic* 433b, 591b; *Laws* 639a--b, 964b--965d; *Meno* 88a--b; *Gorgias* 492a; *Phaedo* 69b--c

The combination of the natural capacities and good education enables the soul that eagerly desires to be unified with the divine, the soul driven by love to “grasp Being adequately in the end,” the hope of doing just that. It is, however, only a hope. The conjunction of the necessary conditions just mentioned is not in itself sufficient for blessedness, and divine agency plays a part in at least two ways as far as gifts and grace are concerned. All normal humans are born with the capacities of memory, reason, and the capacity to be educated, but they are not equally capable (*Republic* 370a). Some receive gifts, we might call them talents, in a degree that might distinguish the gifted from others. But these gifts require development, and that development is also a gift. Plato warns that those persons born gifted who do not receive the correct sort of education, those that are allowed to develop “in the midst of evil images like cattle in bad grass, plucking tufts all the day long, so that little by little a great evil comes to reside in their souls” (*Republic* 401b–c) are dangerous and miserable. The description of the poorly educated and, as a result unjust soul, is described at *Republic* 588b--590d, and such people are possible enemies of the state and bear watching (*Republic* 495a, 518e--519a; *Laws* 661b–c, 766a).

The possession of the cardinal virtues is an intermediate end (given that happiness or blessedness is the ultimate end) and counted as a successful educational outcome, but Plato adds to this set and includes other virtues such as the love of learning (*Republic* 376b–c, 411d, 475c, 485d, 490a, 535d, 581b), love of the noble, fine, beautiful (all of which collapse into the Good; *Republic* 400d--403c), the love of truth (*Republic* 485c–d), gracefulness (*Republic* 400c--401e, 486d, 588a; *Laches* 182d), and simplicity (*Republic* 400e; cf. *Laws* 679c). The most complete sort of good education results in a consonance (συμφωνία) residing in the mature soul that recognizes how fortunate (εὐτυχής) he has been. Consider the following passage found at *Laws* 653a5–c4:

I say that the first childish perception of pleasure and pain in the young accompanies the nascent formation of virtue and vice in the soul. As to prudence and steadfast true opinion, one is fortunate to come by them even in old age. Indeed, only the perfect man comes to have these things and all the goods they entail. I reckon that education attends the first formation of virtue in a child. Clearly, when pleasure, love, pain, and hate are bred correctly in souls not yet capable of rational thought, then once they are so capable, those souls agree that they have become correctly accustomed to the proper habits. This agreement is the whole of virtue; but the portion that fosters the correct relation to pleasures and pains, so that one hates what it is necessary to hate from beginning to end, and likewise to love what should be

loved, if this is taken as a definition and called “education,” then I think that you have defined it correctly.¹²

That which is true shares in divinity even if it is true *opinion* (ἀληθεὶς δόξας), and one has an obligation to act correctly (ὀρθῶς) as one becomes “accustomed to the proper habits” (ὀρθῶς εἰθίσθαι...ἔθῶν), to love and hate things that are necessary (here *χρη*, elsewhere *ἀνάγκη*) to love and hate. Truth is stable, and therefore necessitates consonance with the human soul and itself. The words “correctly,” “proper,” and “necessary” are terms denoting obligation, not freedom.

We are now in position to compare Plato’s notion of grace and gifts with that of the gospel’s conception of them. There is some advantage to be gained from comparing Greek terms. The use of χάρις and εὐχαρις (grace) differs significantly in the works of Plato when compared to the Greek New Testament. In Plato these two terms most often refer to the phenomena surrounding musical education. In

context, grace is a gift, indicating both a quality of innate, physical grace, especially when describing both the movements of a naturally graceful dancer, as well as the consequent graceful character of one who has received a correct musical education. The arguments for the benefits of a correct musical education, and the harmful effects of a bad one, are consistent across the corpus. Evidence for this can be found by comparing *Republic* 376e--403c, a work written in Plato’s middle years, with *Laws*, his last work, at 652a--673a (of particular interest is the discussion of *χαρις* at 667d--668a). There is nothing explicit that differs from this teaching that occurs in the earlier “socratic” dialogues. To the



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Reformed ear, such a teaching might echo a familiar teaching concerning gifts. This is not to say that one could not make an argument for a stronger relationship between the Platonic use of these terms with a Reformed doctrine of grace, but such a task would require shouldering an interpretive burden beyond the scope of this article.

More closely akin might be the idea conveyed by the term μακάριος (blessedness). For Plato this would describe a person who (1) has been blessed with the natural capacities mentioned above; (2) has received the sort of education that properly developed these gifts; (3) has lived a life in accordance with the pattern written upon the human heart;

12. *Laws* 653a5--c4: ΑΘ. Λέγω τοίνυν τῶν παίδων παιδικὴν εἶναι πρώτην αἴσθησιν ἡδονὴν καὶ λύπην, καὶ ἐν οἷς ἀρετὴ ψυχῆ καὶ κακία παραγίνεται πρώτην, ταῦτ' εἶναι. φρόνησιν δὲ καὶ ἀληθεῖς δόξας βεβαίους εὐτυχῆς ὅτι καὶ πρὸς τὸ γήρας παρεγένετο· τέλος δ' οὐκ ἔστ' ἄνθρωπος ταῦτα καὶ τὰ ἐν τούτοις πάντα κεκτημένος ἀγαθὰ. παιδεῖαν δὲ λέγω τὴν παραγινομένην πρώτην παισὶν ἀρετὴν-ἡδονὴν δὴ καὶ φιλία καὶ λύπη καὶ μῖσος ἂν ὀρθῶς ἐν ψυχαῖς ἐγγίνωνται μήπω δυναμένων λόγῳ λαμβάνειν, λαβόντων δὲ τὸν λόγον, συμφωνήσωσι τῷ λόγῳ ὀρθῶς εἰθίσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν προσηκόντων ἔθῶν, αὕτη 'σθ' ἡ συμφωνία σύμπασα μὲν ἀρετὴ, τὸ δὲ περὶ τὰς ἡδονὰς καὶ λύπας τεθραμμένον αὐτῆς ὀρθῶς ὥστε μισεῖν μὲν ἃ χρὴ μισεῖν εὐθύς ἐξ ἀρχῆς μέχρι τέλους, στέργειν δὲ ἃ χρὴ στέργειν, τοῦτ' αὐτὸ ἀποτεμῶν τῷ λόγῳ καὶ παιδεῖαν προσαγορεύω, κατὰ γε τὴν ἐμὴν ὀρθῶς ἂν προσαγορεύοις.

(4) and has been liberated from the body (the flesh) and drawn near to the divine. The same passages cited just now pertain, along with those that describe the blessed after life, in particular the famous Myth of Er (*Republic* 614b--621d).

Even more closely aligned is the use of the words σώζω (to save from death) and σῶς (safe), and there are other etymologically related words. There are twenty-five uses of σώζω in *Republic* and thirty-five uses in *Laws*, but to my mind the most interesting comes at the end of the aforementioned Myth of Er and close to the conclusion of the *Republic*. There we are told that the myth was not lost, but preserved, and if we paid heed to it and were persuaded by it, ἡμᾶς ἄν σώσειε, *it would save us* (*Republic* 621c1). The Greek New Testament uses this word 138 times, its first occurrence found at Acts 2:21.

Even more profitable than a comparison of terms is the comparison of concepts. Therefore, considering the concepts I've described above, here is what I argue Plato and the gospel have in common: on both accounts divine agency is the source of gifts, and the dispensation of these gifts is ultimately unpredictable, ineffable, immutable, and freely given (in every metaphysical and practical sense).¹³ The works of providence are, and will ultimately remain, beyond the ken of human beings. Human beings are separated from the divine, yet they love the divine and long to be united with it, but to do so requires harmony and kinship between the human soul and the divinely established, lawful pattern.

Philip Melancthon argued that Plato was less beneficial than Aristotle insofar as the latter was much more straightforward when presenting his method and teaching. He did not mean that the two arrived at wildly different conclusions. In fact Melancthon asserts that they agree on most points (they certainly agree on education). What Melancthon recommends is that the novice begin with Aristotle, and by doing so he will grasp more readily Plato's convoluted presentation. Melancthon duly warns that Plato is not to be confused with the gospel on the grounds that natural revelation cannot discover the mystery of salvation, but he does describe what Plato accomplished. He tells us that the conclusions of "true philosophy" (like Plato's) have some notion of, or kinship with, divine laws. Such a philosophy, he writes,

[R]ecognizes that there is a God, it judges on civic morals, it sees that this distinction between worthy and vile acts is implanted in us by divine providence, it considers that horrid crimes are punished by God, and it also has some presentiment of immortality.¹⁴

13. *Pace Westminster Confession of Faith*, 2:1.

14. Philip Melancthon, "On Plato," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, ed. Sachiko Kusukawa, trans. Christina F. Salazar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 203.

I agree. Plato successfully worked his way to these conclusions, as well as the propositions I set out earlier. I also agree, as I must, that natural revelation cannot discover the doctrine of salvation.¹⁵

There is, however, another very important way that Plato diverges from the gospel. As I've shown, the love of the divine and the human desire to approach it are taught by Plato. I've described the education that takes one on an upward path, increasing in understanding and wisdom (think sanctification), striving for reconciliation. What Plato does not allow for is the possibility that the universal human love for the divine is reciprocated by the divine itself. We love God and desire to be reconciled with him, but Plato is silent on the possibility that God would desire to reconcile with us. It is true that the creator/craftsman/god of *Timaeus* is "without jealousy" in his creative act, but he is motivated by his love for the *forms* to create (to imitate the Good, primarily), not for the love of the world (κόσμος).¹⁶

More significantly, the gospel story would appear to be a logical impossibility for Plato in a very fundamental way; he explicitly denies the possibility of the incarnation. The reason for this can be found (most succinctly among others) in *Republic* 381b-e, where Socrates argues against the traditional prevailing myths that portray the gods as conniving, lustful, false, and mutable. His view on this is stated during an extended critique of poetry *vis à vis* the kind of stories the young will be told in the course of their education.¹⁷ Stories that feature the gods behaving like humans (but assisted in their crimes by possessing supernatural shape-shifting powers) will only serve to corrupt the characters of the young, and they should not be raised on such harmful ideas. The traditional popular notion that the gods change shape and take on different forms in order to do wicked things is harmful to the souls that hear it. Being good in the most complete way, gods are by nature unable to change from that

state. Furthermore, they could not willingly become something lesser and still be good. They could not logically relinquish or change their perfectly good natures and still be perfectly good. Socrates declares that the gods are good, and that being good, they would never reduce themselves to something that was lesser in nature.¹⁸

This notion, however, directly contradicts Scripture at Philippians 2:5-7:

[Christ Jesus] who, though as in the form of God,
Did not consider equality with God
To be like a prize to cling to
But instead relinquished his privilege
Taking for Himself the form of a slave

15. *Pace Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1:1.

16. *Timaeus* 29d--31a.

17. This is the predominant subject matter of *Republic* Books II and III.

18. Cf. *Timaeus* 41a-d.

Becoming in image like men
And was revealed in the form of a man.¹⁹

This cannot be reconciled with Plato's philosophy concerning divine dispensation, nor with Aristotle's description of the famous unmoved mover. The divergence is plain. The concept of God's love for his creation, the incarnation of Christ and his sacrifice, the resurrection, and the salvation that flows as its consequence, is not only foreign to Plato's thought, it is directly denied. Furthermore, these things cannot be discovered by "the light of nature."

Plato's notion of grace follows a logical sequence, one of necessary and sufficient conditions intimately connected with his corresponding logic of education. Education, generally speaking, is conjunction of the innate gifts with the experiential process that determines an individual's character. Good education is well-guided experience (instilled

19. Philippians 2:6-7: ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων
οὐχ ἀρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο
τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ,
ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐξένωσεν
μορφῇ δούλου λαβῶν
ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος
καὶ σχήματι ἐβρεθείς ὡς ἄνθρωπος.

by habituation and formal teaching) that correctly orients the pupil toward the Good, and in the process teaches the pupil how to discern the Good from its opposite on his own. The truly blessed person has both the initial gifts and the opportunity and perseverance to actualize them.

The distinctions between the Platonic doctrine of grace and that of the gospel could not be more obvious. There are perhaps some features of Plato's account that are more distant from the gospel and the Westminster Confession of Faith than others. Plato's work, however, is the effort of a man of good will. His philosophy evinces a love of both humanity and the divine, as well as a desire to benefit his fellow man in the best spirit of *agape*. It can teach us much; and its arguments, as well as Aristotle's, can readily be deployed and brought to bear in the practice of apologetics.

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A DISCOURSE ABOUT CIVIL GOVERNMENT

BY JOHN COTTON, EDITED BY STEPHEN WOLFE

From 1631 to 1691, the Massachusetts Bay Colony limited voting rights and civil-office holding to men who were official members of the established church. As immigration increased and the second generation came of age, these limitations were repeatedly challenged, especially by notables in England (such as Lord Say)² who conditioned their immigration on having the franchise. Objections to this law arose in the colony as early as the late 1630s. John Cotton (1585–1652), a prominent New England minister, wrote A Discourse about Civil Government to defend the voting policy against an unknown New England author who, according to Cotton, "misstated" the question and hence sought to "prove that which is not denied." In the excerpt below, Cotton takes pains to properly state the question before making his case for the voting policy. The Discourse was well-known in both Massachusetts and the New Haven Colony, having been circulated in part by Cotton's friend and fellow minister John Davenport (1597–1670), and was referenced at least to the time of Cotton Mather (1663–1728).³ It was officially published in 1663. In this excerpt,

we see Cotton's heavy reliance on the work of continental Reformed scholar Franciscus Junius (1545–1602).

The members of the churches of Christ are considerable under a twofold respect answerable to the twofold man, which is in all the members of the church while they are in this world, *the inward and the outward man* (2 Cor. 4:16). Whereunto the only wise God has fitted and appointed two sorts of administrations, *ecclesiastical* and *civil*. Hence, they are capable of a twofold relation, and of action and power suitable to them both, *viz., civil and spiritual*, and accordingly must be exercised about both in their seasons, without confounding those two different states, or destroying either of them, while what they transact in civil affairs is done by virtue of their civil relation, their church-state only fitting them to do it according to God.

Now that the state of the question may appear, I think it seasonable and necessary to premise a few distinctions, to prevent all mistakes, if it may be.

First then, let us distinguish between the two administrations or polities, *ecclesiastical* and *civil*, which men commonly call the *church* and *commonwealth*. I incline rather to them who speaking of a *Christian communion*, make the communion to be the *genus*, and the state eccle-

1. The text is taken from the Samuel Green and Marmaduke Johnson edition, published in 1663 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Spellings, capitalizing, and grammar are modernized (ed.). Cotton emphasizes importance with italicized text.

2. John Cotton responded directly to Lord Say in 1636 in a now well-known letter titled "Letter to Lord Say and Sele."

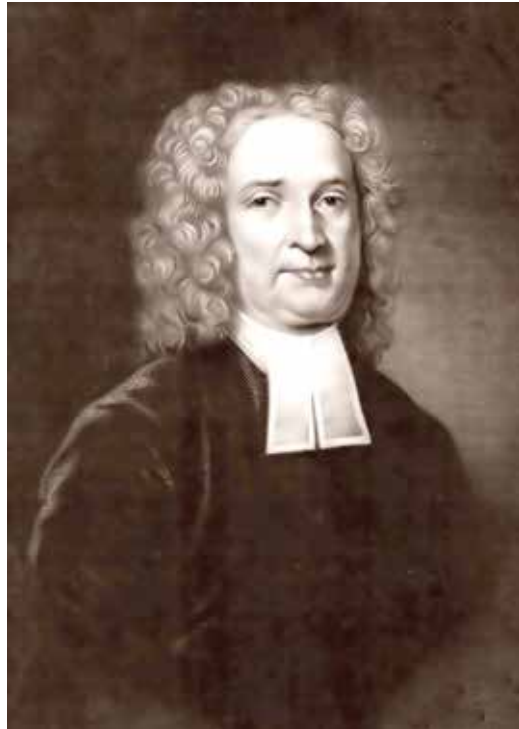
3. Much of this information is provided by Isabel M. Calder in "The Authorship of a Discourse About Civil Government in a New Plantation Whose Design Is Religion," *The American Historical Review* 37 no. 2 (Jan. 1932).

siastical and civil to be the *species* of it. For in a Christian communion there are these different administrations or polities or states, ecclesiastical and civil. Ecclesiastical administrations are a “divine order appointed to believers for holy communion of holy things” [and] civil administrations are “a humane order appointed by God to man for civil fellowship of humane things.” Thus [Franciscus] Junius⁴ defines them and makes order *the genus of them both*, God *the efficient and author of them both*, God’s glory *the last end of them both*, man *the common subject of both*, and so they agree very well in the *general nature, efficient [cause], end, and subject*, yet with a difference in all. For,

1. Though both agree in this, that there is order in their administrations, yet with this difference that the guides in the church have not a despotical, but economical power only, being *not lords over Christ’s heritage, but stewards and ministers of Christ and of the church*;⁵ the dominion and law-giving power being reserved to Christ alone, *as he only [is the] head of the church*.⁶ But in the other state he has given lordly power, authority, and dominion unto men.

2. Though both agree in this, that *man is the common subject of them both*, yet with this difference, man by nature being a reasonable and sociable creature, capable of civil order, is or may be the subject of civil power and state. But man by grace called out of this world to fellowship with Jesus Christ, and with his people, is the only subject of church power; yet so, as the outward man of church members is subject to the civil power in common with other men, while their inward man is the subject of spiritual order and administrations.

3. Though they both agree in this, that *God is the efficient [cause] and author of them both, and that by Christ*, yet not *eadem ratione* [for the same reason]. For, God as the Creator and Governor of the world is the author of civil order and administrations. But God as in covenant with his people in Christ is the author of church administrations. So likewise Christ, as the essential word and wisdom of God creating and governing the world is the efficient [cause] and fountain of civil order and administrations.⁷ But as mediator of the New Covenant and head of the church,⁸ he establishes ecclesiastical order.



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4. Though they both agree in this, that they have *the same last end, viz., the glory of God*, yet they differ in their next ends; for the next end of civil order and administrations is *the preservation of humane societies in outward honor, justice, and peace*. But the next ends of church order and administrations are *the conservation, edification, and salvation of souls, pardon of sins, power against sin, peace with God, etc.*

5. Hence arises another difference about the *objects* of these different states. For though both agree in this, that they have the *common welfare* for their aim and scope, yet the things about which the civil power is primary conversant are *bodies, τα βιωτικά* (1 Cor. 6:4) or *τά πρὸς τὸν βίον*,⁹ “the things of this life” as *goods, lands, honor, the liberties and peace of the outward man*. The things whereabout the church power is exercised are *τά πρὸς τὸν θεόν*, “the things of God” (Heb. 5:1) as *the souls and consciences of men, the doctrine and worship of God, the communion of the saints*. Hence also they have different laws, different officers, [and] different power, whereby to reduce men to order, according to their different objects and ends.

Now that a just harmony may be kept between these two different orders and administrations, two extremes must be avoided. [The first is] that they be not confounded, either (1) by giving the spiritual power, which is proper to the church, into the hand of the civil magistrate, as *Erastus* would have done in the matter of excommunication. If any magistrate should presume to thrust himself by his authority or otherwise into a work which properly belongs to a church officer, let him remember what befell *Saul* and *Uzziah* for so doing. Or (2) by giving civil power to church officers, who are called to attend only to spiritual matters, and the

things of God, and therefore may not be distracted from them by secular entanglements. I say, church officers, not church members; for they (not being limited as the officers are by God) are capable of two different employments, suiting with two different men in them, in different respects, as has been said. And as they may lawfully be employed about things of this life, so they are of all men fittest, being sanctified and dedicated to God to carry on all worldly and civil business to God’s ends, as we shall declare in due time....¹⁰

The second extreme to be avoided is that these two different orders and states, ecclesiastical and civil be not set in opposition as contraries, that one should destroy the other, but as coordinate states in the same place reaching forth help mutually each to other, for the welfare of both, according to God. So that both officers and members of churches be subject, in respect of the outward man, to the civil

4. Cotton relies on Franciscus Junius’s *Ecclesiastici sive de Natura et Administrationibus Ecclesiae Dei* (Frankfurt, 1581) for much of his argument in this excerpt. These definitions are Cotton’s translations of Junius’s Latin text in *Ecclesiastici*, 186. Later in his text (which is not included here), Cotton calls Junius a “learned and godly man.” In support of the central contention of Cotton’s argument, he later translates Junius saying, “We affirm that the magistrate to whom the civil administration is committed is or ought to be not only in the church, but also taken out of the church” (*Ecclesiastici*, 199).

5. John 1:23; Matt. 3:11; 1 Cor. 3:5, 21; 2 Cor. 1:24; 4:5; 5:20; 1 Pet. 5:1[–3] (C.) Junius (pp. 191–92) cites these as well and in the same order (ed.).

6. Luke 22:25; John 19:10; 1 Pet. 2:13 (C.) Junius (p. 190) cites these as well (ed.).

7. John 1:1, 3, 10; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:2, 3; Prov. 8:15 (C.)

8. Eph. 1:22; 5:23 and 4:8, 11 (C.)

9. This phrase is not in the New Testament, though it is in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (IX.6.2). Cotton could simply be juxtaposing *τά πρὸς τὸν θεόν*, which is in Hebrews 5:1 (ed.).

10. Cotton then discusses “the devolving of civil power upon pastors of churches,” which “gave rise” to the Pope.

power of those who bear rule in the civil state according to God, and teach others so to do. And that the civil magistrates and officers, in regard of the inward man, subject themselves spiritually to the power of Christ in church ordinances, and by their civil power preserve the same in outward peace and purity; and this will best be attained, when the pastor may say to the magistrate, as Gregory Nazianzen wrote to the magistrate of Nazianzum, "I know thou art a sheep of my flock, a holy sheep of a holy flock," [and] again, "You rule with Christ, and administer to Christ; you have the sword from him: let this gift which you have received from him be kept pure for him." And [it is attained] when the civil magistrate in his church-state answers Ambrose [according to] his description of a good emperor: "A good magistrate is within the church, not above it."

Lastly, [it is attained] when according to Junius his [Junius's] description of the power of the Christian magistrate in church matters, he [the civil magistrate] accounts it his duty to embrace in fellowship with the whole church (*ut verum Christi & Ecclesiae membrum*),¹¹ the laws given by God in the church and the means sanctified by him to nourish the inward man and to protect and defend the same, *tamquam magistratus a deo ordinatus*.¹² For he says, as he is a Christian, he is *sancta ovis de sancto Christi grege* (i.e. "A holy sheep of Christ's holy flock"). But as a magistrate he is *custos ordinis vindexque publici*, that

11. "as the truth of Christ and as a member of the Church" (ed.).
 12. "as a magistrate having been appointed by God" (ed.).

is, "a preserver of public order."¹³ Such were (besides the good kings of Judah) Constantine, Theodosius, etc. in some measure, though very defective....¹⁴

The end of all civil government & administrations...is *the public and common good*, whether natural, as in the *preservation of life and safety*; or moral, as *justice and honesty in human societies*; or civil, as *peace, liberty of commerce*; or spiritual as to *protect the church in spiritual, though outward, order and administrations in peace and purity*. And this last is principally to be attended unto, and therefore such as are entrusted with this care are called *the ministers of God*, to note the principal end whereunto they serve, viz., the things wherein God is most directly and immediately honored, which is in promoting man's spiritual good, so far as they are enabled by their civil power.

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13. Cotton closely follows Junius in *Ecclesiastici*, 203. The Gregory of Nazianzen and Ambrose quotes are found in Junius's *Ecclesiastici*, 201–2 (ed.).
 14. Cotton provides further distinctions that lead to the "true state of the question," which ultimately is whether "free burgesses have the only power of choosing from among themselves civil magistrates." He affirms and proceeds with his argument. The final paragraph in our excerpt, concerning the ends of civil government, supports (according to Cotton) this form of government.

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