

Plato's Scientific Myth: A Response to Dante Germino

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DANTE GERMINO HAS PROCLAIMED that "political philosophy has yet to begin." From its pre-Socratic birth, "philosophy implies that mankind is a universal community transcending space and time," and that "every human being who has ever existed or will exist is in principle capable of participation" in that universal ground. Philosophy never became political, and politics never became truly philosophical, because:

The early, so-called "presocratic" philosophers were apparently so much in awe of their newly experienced encounter with the "one god," that they were unable to bring out the political implications of their discovery. By the time that Plato and Aristotle began to write about what they called "politics," however, they were so confined in their experience of life in the *polis* that they crammed the universalism of philosophy into the narrow confines of the Greek city-state.¹

From Plato to the present, political inquiry has been framed in the parochial terms of the limited political community, such as the stable nation-state or the revolting sect. Germino reasons that by liquidating this persistent mortgage to narrow institutional traditions we can "set political philosophy free, thus rescuing both philosophy and politics from the fateful consequences of their enforced separation." He recommends that we return to the philosophers who preceded Plato's mortgage for a new science of politics grounded in "the images of universal mankind as an open society under the one, world-transcendent God."² The stone that the builders rejected must become the cornerstone.

For all his appeal to ancient philosophy, some may confound Germino's plea with the characteristically modern agenda of

egalitarian universalism. Those familiar with his work will not press this label, but insist that few have equaled Germino in disarming the vicious lures of modern political ideology.³ With so much to applaud in his recent article, our only lament is that it was not prefixed by the caution that the benefits of the limited political community may be most easily ignored by those who most enjoy them.

Launching the science of politics from the pre-Socratic platform is like riding a toboggan off a ski jump. The empyrean vault is also a free fall. The philosophers may speak with authority about politics if, like the angels of Empedocles, they have fallen from the abode of the blessed to "the unfamiliar land of death and wrath and of putrefaction," there to "become prophets, poets, physicians, or princes among the mortals." When the toboggan crashes down, we may well share their first impression of the earth, "I wept and I wailed."⁴ But this is the proper, turbulent starting point for the political philosopher—the apprehension of human finitude.

The pre-Socratic philosophers surveyed the field of existing things and found them all subject to a flux within limits. No thing is self-generated; every thing is ephemeral and passing. This is familiar enough, but far stranger than it appears. So strange that we may only pursue the problem mythologically. For as we run up against the limits of the field, we bump into the unlimited which limits—the origin and end of things which is not to be found within the field, but beyond or beneath it. We may approach the transcendental ground from which things emerge and into which they disappear only after we have veiled our eyes to the literal. It is a wonder that we may approach at all, for the unlimited must be an ineffable unknown beyond the ken of the finite creature. Yet

we have somehow become acutely aware of our finitude, and the source of that awareness has, thereby, posed itself as a mystery with intelligible structure. But intelligible only through the mythological medium, for there is no other means of communicating a revelation. Like the pre-Socratic mystics, Plato and Aristotle recognized that it is not by choice that we discover ourselves in a state of ignorance, wonder, and curiosity concerning reality and our own role in it. The unlimited has posed itself as a question as it has posed humanness as the situs for the pursuit and articulation of the question. "For in your presence, Lord, I have become a question to myself."⁵

Once reality has been experienced as problematic, the experience itself becomes problematic. Once man has discovered his immersion within mystery, he must confront himself as a limited manifestation of the mystery. He may do this by opening himself to a simple question, "where do you come from, my friend, and where are you going?,"⁶ or its equivalent, the only question the great wise man could not answer, "Who are you?"⁷ Those who really hear are easy to pick out. They are the ones who have fallen dumb, who yield to the more impetuous and cover their ears, for the resumed recital sure to follow will strike them not only as inadequate, but irreverent. These silent ones will become the philosophers when they learn to speak about what they barely know—that we are somehow less and more than the accomplishments and allegiances which we allow to form and direct us; that our family, school, church, party, sport, vocation, or soap opera are meaningful insofar as through them we may embody something of the divine character forever beyond our reach. We begin to participate philosophically when the acute awareness of our finitude sets us wondering about, and wandering toward, the unlimited source, and when we attune our limited commitments more toward the perfection which forever calls into question their adequacy. This is something we can all do, and it may be a part of what Germino intends by his

declaration that all people have the potential for philosophic participation and that this is "the distinguishing mark of humanness."⁸ But we have yet to ask the politically relevant questions as to how many actualize this potential, and how much.

The pre-Socratic encounter with a divine unity behind the diverse appearances of the mythological cosmos did not eliminate the prior and continuing experiences of that diversity. Because the universal ground manifested itself in immanent experience only in terms of multiplicity, the pre-Socratic discovery *posed* the problems of human order, it did not solve it. The revelation of reality as a magnificent complexity was more a revelation about human consciousness, aware of itself in a more penetrating and articulate way, than about an external reality which had not changed. The pre-Socratics understood that there are diverse modes of immersion in universal being, and that this added awareness of the predicament, the movement from immersion to participation, will be recognized by surprisingly few, even if all are carried along within the same encompassing mystery. All are invited to share the philosopher's glimpse of the drama that engulfs humanity and its creations. But this universal potential, the "half-divine thing" within every soul, will be embraced only by the few who awaken to it more fully.

The movements of the soul which animate the speculation of a Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Heraclitus are not everybody's affair—as Heraclitus had diagnosed rightly. The many need gods with "shapes." When the "shapes" of the gods are destroyed with social effectiveness, the many will not become mystics but agnostics.⁹

The pre-Socratic differentiation drew into question the adequacy of the more limited archaic myths of Hellenic culture as it raised the question "What is reality?" to a more self-conscious level. The philosopher is driven to contemplate the foundational question he cannot answer in the hope that he may better address the every-

day question which must be answered, however piecemeal, for every historical society, "How should we order ourselves?" Reality is one, but the modes of participation in that reality are bounteous. The pull of the philosopher's inquiry into universals emerges from the same unconscious depth which gives birth to mythological multiplicity. "The *philomythos* is in a sense a *philosophos* for it is filled with wonders."¹⁰ For the pre-Socratics, philosophical participation in the universal ground made the idiosyncrasies of the Olympian gods appear "unseemly," but it did not suggest the abolition of the old gods—only a better way of looking at them.¹¹ The civil religious tradition of any real society, be it the Greek *polis* or the American republic, can be animated by philosophical insight only as the order of that society's previous modes of mythological participation is cautiously revised. The philosopher understands that the participatory society is a rare work of art, made possible through predictable human relationships, and the institutional and mythological incarnation of deeper values which make these relationships authoritative, at least for a time. The polis and the virtues which kept it in existence made the life of the philosopher possible, and so the ecstatic vision of the pre-Socratics is misunderstood if removed from the context of the closed society and its institutions.

With Xenophanes, the Sophia of the Mystic-philosopher reaches beyond the polis toward a universal realissimum for mankind. Even with Xenophanes, however, the polis itself is not transcended; even the mystic-philosopher is a figure in the competitive struggle for the formation of the polis.¹²

Professor Germino has inflated the universalism of the pre-Socratics and, thereby, diminished the quality of their discovery. Few experience the mystical *noesis* of the philosopher, and even these few may communicate their spiritual insights only through mortgaged media. Widescale participation in the same ground which gives birth to the insights is

made possible through competitive revision of the limited institutions and mythologies of a real society, for they are the embodiment of past revelation.

Eric Voegelin introduced the mortgage metaphor when he described Israel's Covenant as "a perpetual mortgage of the world-immanent, concrete event on the transcendent truth that on its occasion was revealed."¹³ For Voegelin, mortgaging is a problem of degree and balance; foreclosure is impossible. The ethical demands of Yahweh are universal, but they may only be incarnated through the confessional heritage of a real society. The voice of the prophet is authoritative because he has returned to the cultural quarry from which he was hewn and encountered there an evocative source. Likewise, the philosopher may tear at the mythological forms, which have become historically opaque to their divine source, but he cannot replace the myth as the medium for communication with the transcendental ground.

Mortgaged institutions and mythologies make available to all a precious diversity of participation in the mystery of reality. They are not only the media of our assent to what is culturally common and valuable, but also the media of our ascent to what is universally common and valuable. "Mankind is no concrete society at all."¹⁴ Our apprehension of the unlimited is indirect or reflective. We suffer a glimpse of transcendence through the mirror of analogical language, drawn up from the symbolic forms of an historical community. Like Icarus, we may abuse the gifts of our fathers, the wings made painstakingly from earthly stuff, if we forget the real dangers which necessitate our flight. Hovering too long or too near the sun, we will not reach the mainland, but lose our wings and fall headlong into a vast and chaotic sea. We must take account of our finitude before we embark or discover too late that "there's no place like home."

Professor Germino has illustrated the varieties of sunstroke most prevalent today, and warned that they are symptomatic of a deeper spiritual disease. The disease is the

disintegration of the public realm, and its symptoms are the politics of power and the politics of withdrawal. Germino argues that something is dangerously wrong when politics means nothing other than " 'who gets, what, when, and how,' " and when philosophy is "confused with the 'privileged knowledge' of an elite of academic experts," "an indulgence by Epicurean aesthetes," "an idiosyncratic language for twentieth century academic intellectuals," and the "study of texts as an end in itself."¹⁵

The withdrawal into private worlds facilitates the fall of the public realm into vulgar power politics. When philosophy is dead, and there is no one around to illuminate and defend humanness as a mystery participating within a mystery, the vacuum will be filled by lesser souls engaged in the literalization of the mysteries. If the multitudes will not endure their finitude, they cannot long endure its embodiment in the public institutions and mythologies created by the great souls of the past. Instead they will quell the transcendent source of their anxiety by worshipping the earthly gods who have appropriated its turbulence. Rotating eternally around themselves as around their true sun, the lunatics proclaim most boldly their disillusionment. They are ministered to by the cults of alienation, the technical high priests, the service stations of the self, the celebrations of electronic *mimesis*, and the Monday-night armies of hardship cases. Who is the fairest of them all? Turn the mirror of philosophy upside down, see yourself, and this time be satisfied. And what is the apocryphal gospel? Run the yellow light on antiquity.

It is not out of antiquarian interest that we must turn to the formative sources of Western likemindedness—revelation and philosophy. These avenues of spiritual discernment emerge during crises very much like our own: 1) threat from an external empire, 2) atomization of the public realm into a battlefield where competitors pursue their material "interests" behind the banner of a prostituted tradition, and 3) the dream of security fostered by widescale

relinquishment of the most vital social functions to cadres of technical experts.

The entire body of ancient lamentations focuses not upon him who strikes the final blow, leaving behind another ash layer, but upon the prior internal disintegration of "the complex of values and concepts that a particular culture holds in common and which gives some stability and predictability to the public and private transactions that take place in that culture."¹⁶ Likewise, Plato's work is shadowed by the Persian threat and the growing power of Macedonia, but he is more alarmed by the spiritual suicide of Hellenic culture. Like the prophets, Plato finds his fatherland absorbed within an encompassing dream of security, like a beast lapsing into hypnotic paralysis before it is taken by a predator. The beast is a sophist written large, not because there are individual professionals in pursuit of wealth, status and power, but because this is the motivation of the multitude who enroll their young under his tutorship. The false prophet or the sophist, the technician, is hired to paint a camouflage of predictability for the society which has become unpredictable. He is just a little man, cunning in his little craft, who generalizes his mundane rituals to the level of great speculation, as from a prison into a temple.¹⁷ Parents go further, for they dangle not only material rewards before their offspring, but "they draw on Homer, Hesiod, and Musaeus for promising the favor of the gods in this world and the next."¹⁸ The young are encouraged to pursue their private impulses through public avenues; to prepare tradition in this way or that, like an assortment of food for a concupiscent beast—public opinion.

In his search for a more panoramic science of politics, which would undercut the suicidal politics of power and withdrawal, Germino could have no ally more formidable than Plato, who initiated just such a science in the face of a crisis much like our own: the retreat of the young into esoteric worlds concurrent with the mushrooming of an unabashed lust for power. Plato's recognition of the prohibitive gulf between the abode of the

blessed and the land of wrath did not prevent him from transcribing the formative outline of Western federalism—the second-best procedural order with just institutions and myths to ground public order in the absence of philosophers. Germino indulges in a misunderstanding of Plato which has become canonical within the contemporary “climate of opinions”:

The “politics” which the Platonic Socrates commends is not that of the universal community of mankind but rather the “politics” of the philosopher’s private self, into which he is permitted to withdraw as a consolation prize for not having won power in a *polis* situated in the phenomenal world.¹⁹

Philosophy requires detachment, but Plato recognizes that, aboard the ship of state, the pilot who is occupied too long with his study of the moon, stars, and currents, will be replaced by a mutinous crew who, with their eyes on the cargo, will mistake their power over each other and the rudder, for the power to navigate correctly a vast and unpredictable sea.²⁰ The consequences of the philosophic withdrawal are necessarily political, as the *Apology* and *Crito* so clearly testify. The philosopher’s vigilance in dismantling the widespread appeal of well-disguised errors and brilliant deceptions—like the contemporary lure of silly universalism and silly egalitarianism—is a social enterprise undertaken “representatively for every man.”²¹ The Parable of the Cave is at the center of Plato’s *Republic* because, as it describes the conversion toward universal transcendence, it likewise addresses the real problem of the dominance of untruth in the Athenian city-state. The prisoner accustoms himself to the universal real-issimum beyond the gods of the *polis*; yet he returns to the cave of shadows in order to share something of what he knows with those who can experience only the indirect effects of the light—the shapes of the myth. He who encounters the blinding light of transcendent order necessarily becomes a stranger to the pragmatic affairs of political society. Unlike the alienations

and escapes of the spiritually anemic, the philosopher is called to heightened responsibility for the public realm. Only he can restore social attunement to the divine source of institutional order. Just as Socrates pronounced himself a stranger to the ritual of the courtroom, Plato finds himself the Athenian Stranger who must undertake the practical project of revising the culturally limited institutions and myths of a real republic.

Plato was not so enamored of the Greek city-state and its institutions that he was unable to “set political philosophy on the only footing worthy of itself: the open society.”²² He had no doubt that every closed society may be measured and found wanting against the standard of the philosopher’s soul. Plato believed that some people would always participate more in humanness than others. With this in mind, the mature Plato found in the federated *ethnos* a model for the compound whole which embraces many limited communities within its hierarchy and allows for alternative forms of participation in the divine-human mystery. The most open society possible must secure, however piecemeal, an ordered replica of human consciousness itself: hierarchical diversity amidst unity, and mythological permanence in the context of ineffability and ephemerality.

The great souls of the American foundation recognized that without a grounding in broad-minded public spirit and morality, the hierarchical diversity of our institutions would decay into a volatile pluralism. The Hobbesian war of all against all ferments underneath the weight of popularized universalistic manias. The death of the parties, the mushrooming of single-issue groups, the rotting of collective discipline and responsibility in the media and Congress, the manipulative panderage of primaries, and the marketing of the vicissitudes of public personalities and polls, cannot be fixed by technicians who are ignorant of the traditional, covenantal grounding of representation in America.

The supposed weakness which Germino addresses as Plato’s “mortgage of the polis”

is in fact the strength Plato offers in contrast to ecumenic universalism. The open society of the spirit cannot be identified with the universal society of the mundane sphere. The heavenly politics of the city in speech is "given en mytho, as a story, or fable, or fiction";²³ it cannot exist in the real world. With Plato, we are suspicious of any call for the political incarnation of philosophic universalism "through the constructive integration of spirit and power."²⁴ All attempts to incarnate a unanimous mankind serve only to dampen our appetite for this marriage. When we survey the ecumenic phantasies of Islamic revolutionaries or the procrustean nightmares of those who tend the Cambodian garden, our objection is probably not that the devotee of power has mortgaged his campaign through culturally limited institutions. We may be thankful for that. The liquidation of the cultural, horizontal constraints placed on universalism would throw no stumbling block in the way of totalitarian power or anarchist withdrawal, presumably Germino's two worst adversaries. If we find that the universalistic manias which inspire young people to sell flowers for subsistence and old people to order tanks into a mountainous desert are institutionally limited, perhaps we could enlist in the priesthood of universal humanity proclaimed by any number of secular religionists, like Auguste Comte, or better still, we could liberate ourselves from all institutional restraints and join Michael Bakunin or Herbert Marcuse in an

anarchist revolution. If all the world were anarchist or positivist or Marxist, et cetera, the open future, and all other attributes of the unlimited, would still be mythologically bound up. Those who would translate an object of faith—universal mankind in this case—into an object of immanent experience are hallucinating. Reality is a mystery; it affords no vantage point outside itself from which literalization may be executed. The most we may expect from the victims of sunstroke is a ridiculous honesty: Aunt Em cried, "'Where in the world did you come from?' 'From the Land of Oz,' said Dorothy gravely."²⁵

We are confronted by a plethora of universalistic political religions, each secure within its dream, each empowered through literalist possession of human souls. Like the dead in the Pamphylian Myth, we must choose a demon, but each offers too much, and so little. Universalists of every stripe are like those who would convince us that when we are out of Schlitz we are out of beer.²⁶ We should follow the mature soul who sees the many brands but prefers a taste of the generic. It is very expensive. The philosopher's discerning taste may become a public force only after he has taken account of his finitude, and discovered his mysterious core by turning to the cultural quarry from which he was hewn. If we cannot take account of our finitude then we should burn the *Summa* of Aquinas as so much straw compared to the mystical vision he cannot share.

¹Dante Germino, "Political Philosophy and the 'Mortgage of the Polis'," *Modern Age*, vol. 24, no. 4 (Fall 1980), pp. 365-366. ²*Ibid.*, pp. 364-369. ³Germino, *Machiavelli to Marx* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). ⁴Empedocles, B118-B121, B146; Eric Voegelin, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p. 222. ⁵St. Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 33. ⁶Plato, *Phaedrus*, 227A. ⁷Plato, *Gorgias*, 447D. ⁸Germino, "Political Philosophy," p. 365. ⁹Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, p. 239. ¹⁰Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b, 18ss. ¹¹Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, p. 180. ¹²*Ibid.*, p. 203. ¹³Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), p. 164. ¹⁴Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), p. 7. ¹⁵Germino, "Political Philosophy," pp. 368, 365.

¹⁶George E. Mendenhall, "The Ancient in the Modern," *Michigan Oriental Studies*, ed. Louis L. Orlin (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976), p. 232. ¹⁷Plato, *Republic*, 496A; see John Wild, *Plato's Theory of Man* (New York: Octagon, 1964). ¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 363; Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p. 80. ¹⁹Germino, "Political Philosophy," p. 366. ²⁰Plato, *Republic*, 488; Wild, *Plato's Theory of Man*. ²¹Voegelin, "On Debate and Existence," *The Intercollegiate Review*, vol. 3, nos. 4-5 (March-April 1967), p. 144. ²²Germino, "Political Philosophy," p. 366. ²³Plato, *Timaeus*, 26c; Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, p. 173. ²⁴Germino, "Political Philosophy," p. 369. ²⁵Frank Lyman Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). ²⁶Sidney E. Mead, *History and Identity* (American Academy of Religion, Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1979), p. 13.