

Sympathy – *sumpatheia*

Notes by Bernadette Brady

A sympathetic cosmos – a brief introduction

Classical cosmology contained the notion of *sumpatheia*, a sympathetic cosmos.¹ This is defined by Sophie Botros when discussing Stoic cosmology as one where nature, life, God/gods or divine, and the organic and inorganic world all combined in one sympathetic connected relationship. Susanne Bobzien defines this concept as the idea that 'in some sense everything in the universe emits some physical influence on everything else.'² The thinking on the nature of the sympathetic relationship which linked all things in the cosmos varied from one school of philosophy to another.

Plato and the divine cosmos

It is in the *Timaeus* that Plato writes of the cosmos being the act of creation of an intelligent and ordering force:

... he [the demiurge] put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, and so he constructed the universe. He wanted to produce a piece of work that would be as excellent and supreme as its nature would allow. This, then, in keeping with our likely account, is how we must say divine providence brought our world into being as a truly living thing, endowed with soul and intelligence.³

Plato viewed the divine force as being both transcendent as well as immanent, external and separate in its ability to design the order of the cosmos but also within 'the minutest constituents of the universe.'⁴ It was both 'unmoved' while at the same time providing motion for all other parts of the universe.⁵ This provider of prime motion, Plato viewed as a divine intelligent cosmos which had power over all things. Fredrich Solmsen notes that the actual eternal order of the heavens, 'suggested to Plato the existence of a divine Soul — or Mind — which inspired and directed these movements. The stars themselves were felt to be divine beings, alive, and animated by their own souls.'⁶ The movement of Plato's divine Soul, which he named the World Soul, filled the cosmos with its intentions. This was referred to by Calcidius,

¹ B. Inwood, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008), p.277.

² Susanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1998] 2005), p.169.

³ Plato, *Timaeus*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. Donald J. Zeyl, ed., Plato Complete Works (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 30b-c.

⁴ Plato, *Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders, Plato, Complete Works (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 903b.

⁵ Plato, *Laws*: 894e-895b.

⁶ Fredrich Solmsen, "Epicurus and Cosmological Heresies," *The American Journal of Philology* Vol. 72, no. No 1 (1951): p.5.

the 4th century philosopher who translated Plato's *Timaeus* from Greek to Latin, who wrote 'So the World Soul is Fate in substance'.⁷

Plato's sympathetic cosmos was thus divinely ordered, benefic and biased towards good.⁸

Stoic Sympathy

The Stoic cosmology was also filled with a divine and ensouled cosmos. Diogenes Laertius, the third century Greek biographer, who wrote of Zeno of Citium (d. 263 B.C.E.), the founder of the Stoa, considered a feature of Stoicism was the unity of the divine cosmos. Diogenes quotes Zeno as saying, 'The substance of God is the whole world and the heaven.'⁹ Diogenes also referred to the work of Chrysippus (279 – 206 B.C.E.) the third head of the Stoa when he wrote: 'as Chrysippus says in the first book of his *De finibus*; for our individual natures are part of the nature of the whole universe.'¹⁰ Diogenes added his own comments on the Stoic cosmology by stating that for the Stoics, '... the entire cosmos too, being an animal and alive and rational...'¹¹ This living creature, the cosmos, was linked to all of its parts, not by direct causes but by sympathy with all parts, both in the heavens and on the earth. Diogenes continued this thought, 'for this is necessitated by the sympathy and common tension of heavenly things in relation to earthly things.'¹²

The Roman philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE), voicing Stoic thought, also commented on this unity of the whole cosmos when he wrote:

Who is not compelled to accept what I say by (consideration of) the tremendous sympathy, agreement, and interconnected relationships of the cosmos... These things, and the mutual harmony of the parts of the cosmos, certainly could not happen as they do unless they were bound together by one divine and continuously connected *pneuma*.¹³

This binding force which linked all things in the cosmos was divine in nature, as Aetius (c.100 C.E.) commented, 'The Stoic made god out to be intelligent, ... and encompasses all seminal principles according to which everything comes about

⁷ J. den Boeft, *Calcidius on Fate* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1970), p.30.

⁸ Plato, *Timaeus*: 30b-c.

⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks, vol. II, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA Harvard University Press, [1925] 2005), 7.148.

¹⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, II: 7.88.

¹¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, II: Book II - 139.

¹² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, II: Book II - 140.

¹³ Quoted from: Brad Inwood and Lloyd P. Gerson, *The Stoics Reader*, trans. Brad Inwood (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2008), p.62.Cicero text 2.19.

according to fate.¹⁴ In this way fate, as with Calcidius' comments on Plato, was seen as the expression of a sympathetic and cosmos.

In commenting on the associated thinking within a sympathetic cosmos, A.A Long, in discussing the Stoic sympathy writes that stones resemble men, for both offer resistance to other objects and 'men and stones are alike in having shape and identity which persists over time.'¹⁵

Aristotle and Sympathy

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) linked his notion of sympathy to the movement of the celestial spheres. Friedrich Solmsen commented on Aristotle's approach to the movement of the spheres:

In his system eternal movement is forever tied to one and the same Cosmos. Movement, Cosmos, and Time are coeternal, and the never-broken movement that he himself has in mind is the rotation which is performed by the heavenly sphere and inspired by the perfection of the Unmoved Mover.¹⁶

In *Meteorology* Aristotle linked this movement of the heavens, these living stars, to the cause of all things on earth: 'this world necessarily has a certain continuity with the upper motions; consequently all its power is derived from them. (For the originating principle of all motion must be deemed the first cause.)'¹⁷ Hence the living stars, through the eternal movement initiated by the love of the unmoved mover, were responsible for all movement on the earth. This movement lead to changes and these changes were sympathetically reflected in the qualities of hot cold wet and dry in all things.¹⁸ Aristotle spoke of these changes as, 'An individual man, for example, being one and the same, becomes now pale and now dark, now hot and now cold, now bad and now good.'¹⁹

As Daryn Lehoux in discussing Aristotle's sympathetic cosmos writes, 'Rivers, plants, and animals co-wax and co-wane with the moon' and the qualities of the stars and planets moved or influenced the similar qualities of hot, cold, wet and dry on earth.'²⁰

¹⁴ Aetius cited in A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic philosophers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 2007), p.274.

¹⁵ A. A. Long, "Soul and Body in Stoicism," *Phronesis* 27, no. 1 (1982): pp.36-37.

¹⁶ Friedrich Solmsen, "Aristotle and Presocratic Cosmogony," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 63(1958): p.278.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Meteorology*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. J.L.Stocks, *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 339a 19-24.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Meteorology*: 339a 19-24.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Categories*: 4a 17-20.

²⁰ Daryn Lehoux, "Tomorrow's News Today: Astrology, Fate, and the Way Out," *Representations* Summer (2006): p.108.

Plotinus and Sympathy

The Greek philosopher Plotinus (204/5 – 270 CE) talked causes but instead of how 'all things must be enchained; and the sympathy and correspondence obtaining in any one closely knit organism must exist, first, and most intensely, in the All.'²¹ He thus argued for a sympathetic cosmos not linked by Stoic causes, based in movement, or Aristotelian causes generated from the 'unmover', but one that was linked through the notion of signs or symbols.

With the heavens portrayed as signs or symbols, all enchained by the notion of sympathy, Plotinus concluded that the nature of a person was composed, firstly, of the unique nature of the individual soul before birth; secondly, of the classical concept of 'chance' or *tyche*, represented by the quality of the time as described by the cosmic circuits for the moment of birth; and, finally, the symbolic implications of those cosmic circuits themselves — the horoscope of the person.²²

Thus rather than a sympathetic cosmos driven by the clear qualities of Aristotle or the singularity of the Stoics, Plotinus argued for a world that '...teems with symbol...' and filled with a symbolic language.²³ In this way Plotinus' sympathetic cosmos was full of the ambiguity of symbols which thus had a multitude of ways for eventual expression in life on earth.

References

- Aristotle. *Categories*. Translated by J.L.Ackrill. Edited by Jonathan Barnes, The Complete Works of Aristotle. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- . *Meteorology*. Translated by J.L.Stocks. Edited by Jonathan Barnes, The Complete Works of Aristotle. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Bobzien, Susanne. *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1998] 2005.
- den Boeft, J. *Calcidius on Fate*. Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1970.
- Diogenes Laertius. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Translated by R.D. Hicks. Vol. II, Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA Harvard University Press, [1925] 2005.
- Inwood, B. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008.
- Inwood, Brad, and Lloyd P. Gerson. *The Stoics Reader*. Translated by Brad Inwood. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2008.

²¹ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (New York, USA: Larson Publications, 1992), II.3.7.

²² Plotinus, *The Enneads*: II.3.10.

²³ Plotinus, *The Enneads*: II.3.7; Th G. Sinnige, "Plotinus on the Human Person and Its Cosmic Identity," *Vigiliae Christianae* 56, no. 3 (2002): p.295.

- Lehoux, Daryn. "Tomorrow's News Today: Astrology, Fate, and the Way Out." *Representations* Summer (2006): 105-122.
- Long, A. A. "Soul and Body in Stoicism." *Phronesis* 27, no. 1 (1982): 34-57.
- Long, A.A., and D.N. Sedley. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 2007.
- Plato. *Laws*. Translated by Trevor J. Saunders, Plato, Complete Works. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.
- . *Timaeus*. Translated by Donald J. Zeyl. Edited by John M. Cooper. ed, Plato Complete Works. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.
- Plotinus. *The Enneads*. Translated by Stephen MacKenna. New York, USA: Larson Publications, 1992.
- Sinnige, Th G. "Plotinus on the Human Person and Its Cosmic Identity." *Vigiliae Christianae* 56, no. 3 (2002): 292-295.
- Solmsen, Fredrich. "Epicurus and Cosmological Heresies." *The American Journal of Philology* Vol. 72, no. No 1 (1951): 1-23.
- Solmsen, Friedrich. "Aristotle and Presocratic Cosmogony." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 63 (1958): 265-282.