

Kosmos from Perfect Sphere to Relationship Between Persons: Evolution of the Greek Understanding of Order

DAN CHIȚOIU*

ABSTRACT: One of the major novelties brought by the Greeks was the description of the world as a *Kosmos*. In ancient Greek thinkers such as Pythagoras, and after him Plato, Aristotle, as well as other thinkers from the Stoics to the Neo-Platonists, the word *kosmos* represented a certain kind of order inherent to reality. An order understood as being governed by *Logos* and described as a geometrical one according to which the world must be a sphere since the sphere is the perfect shape and should be composed of circles, triangles, and symmetries. But *Kosmos* is also a living and intelligent thing, whereby Plato describes it as “the perfect animal.” For the same Plato, by contrast, *Chaos* does not mean the complete absence of order, but rather constitutes a kind of order opposed to *Logos*. Any aspect of reality was, for the ancient Greeks, under the power of the rational order, including inter-human relationships, communities, as well as self-edification. But the Late Antiquity brought a critical change in this vision about the world, once the formulation of the Christian doctrine entered the scene. The Patristic authors based their positions on a fundamental distinction between “created” and “uncreated” so that the picture of the World gained a different kind of complexity, surpassing the geometrical ideal of perfection as the profound *Logos* of reality. Moreover, the insistence on the effective human freedom contrasted with the former Classical Greek assumption of symmetry-order as the ultimate aspect of reality. Rather, the Created World became increasingly understood as the place of encounter between the Tri-Personal God and the human persons, whereby created reality manifests itself as being sustained from the outside and, thus, as not being self-sufficient. This new understanding of order induced multiple and profound changes in the understanding of the human self, in the understanding of others and, finally, in the understanding of reality as a whole. Indeed, connected with this new understanding of order is the arising of an entirely new epoch for human thought.

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* *Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași* (Romania). – This text can be quoted as follows: Dan Chițoiu, “*Kosmos from Perfect Sphere to Relationship Between Persons: Evolution of the Greek Understanding of Order*”. In: João J. Vila-Chã (Org.), *Order and Disorder in the Age of Globalization(s): Philosophy and the Development of Cultures*. Fourth World Congress of COMIUCAP (Johannesburg, South Africa), November of 2013.

World-Order as Ever-living Fire

Heraclitus provided for the first time in the Greek world a concise and profound understanding of *Kosmos* as order in one sentence: “κόσμον τόνδε, τὸν αὐτὸν ἀπάντων, οὔτε τις θεῶν οὔτε ἀνθρώπων ἐποίησεν, ἀλλ’ ἦν ἀεὶ καὶ ἔστιν καὶ ἔσται πῦρ ἀείζωνον, ἀπτόμενον μέτρα καὶ ἀποσβεννύμενον μέτρα”.¹ A description of world that stress the eternity of it as a whole, even if some parts are consumed by fire: yet this fire gives at the same time the order since it offers the measure of any process. Modern attempts to frame Heraclitus’ central statements within the canons of metaphysics or of the scientific model justified by the philosophy of nature have proven to be increasingly insufficient. What, for metaphysics, was explained by the lack of a pre-Socratic distinction that would have indicated immature thought, namely the one between matter and spirit, proves now to be worthy of a serious re-assessment.

Heraclitus’ Logos is not just the logos of the Kosmos but also of the human being; it is not just divine (or spiritual, in metaphysical terms), but also concrete, material. Heraclitus does not claim any philosophical affiliation, nor does he wish to create one. This is so because the only affiliation that he admitted was that of pursuing the exigency of the logos, an exigency which is not only accessible to humans, but also a duty for them. Yet to put this into words is not easy. As he was fully aware of this difficulty, Heraclitus’ writings are metaphoric and emphatic. The Logos cannot be easily expressed, as it is intelligible neither to the ear, nor to the spirit. Heraclitus’ obscurity springs from the difficulty to express verbally an intuition that language cannot grasp. His fragments reveal his distancing attitude and rejection of both religious practices of his contemporaries, especially the way in which initiations were performed, as well as of the way in which the Physics of his time understood reality. As Taylor mentions, Heraclitus’ statement according to which no material substance persists represents a rupture from the Ionian tradition which suggested that unity can be found behind material processes as *water*, *air* or *apeiron*, which remain unaffected by change.

It is also significant to analyze how Heraclitus described the manifestation of the Logos: it provides the unity of all things and, present in us as it is, it reveals to us that everything is one. The physical world is not, as Anaximander believed, the kingdom of injustice, because transformations in the world are subject to certain rules, and becoming is fully subject to a divine law – the law of the Logos which achieves the unity of all things –

¹ Heraclitus, *Fragment DK B30*: “*This world-order, the same of all, no god nor man did create, but it ever was and is and will be: ever-living fire, kindling in measures and being quenched in measures*”.

on which all human laws depend. Logos is described as fire (we should express our reservations vis-à-vis an interpretation which invokes the naiveté of such an association, an interpretation which affected so much the reception of texts written in his time), fire which is lit and extinguished with measure. Yet this measure, which describes a nuanced and profound understanding of the rationality of the world, received the name of justice (Dike), that which penetrates everything and makes sure that the processes of the world do not surpass their confines.

However, the great innovation of Heraclitus' thought is the topic of the hidden harmony of opposed forces, the genuine justice, i.e. the profound unity that seeming oppositions hide and translate: contraries are aspects of the same reality, which are necessarily involved so well that, in reality, reality is one. The Logos is shared by all, and for humans this common thing is intelligence or understanding. This statement must be understood to mean that we have to always stay close to that which is common; it refers to this force, partly material, partly spiritual, which makes rational order possible. In any case, Heraclitus states that in human matters, the logos is more profound and it escapes material uncovering. With Heraclitus, for the first time, we have a stated and described correspondence between the rationality of the world and human rationality. Nevertheless, this correspondence is not one of mechanical influence, but under the paradox of overcoming the non-contradiction law (which, later, Aristotle will consider unacceptable, just like the tradition that followed the rules of formal Logics) and is hard to express. Yet, certainly, the world's rationality stands under something that for Heraclitus cannot be called otherwise but logos. And, together with this change, the term is enriched to a degree that cannot be framed in a simple definition, and it will play another part in the history of thought.

In Heraclitus' description, its action uncovers a status that goes beyond mere physical force, beyond a principle of nature or of human reason, thus lending it a divine character. Here is a key aspect that will constantly challenge subsequent philosophers, so that when John the Evangelist identifies the embodied, crucified and resurrected Jesus with the Logos, from a conceptual point of view, such an identification was intelligible. Some interpreters saw Heraclitus' doctrine on the Logos as the crisscross of Philosophy, Physics and Mysticism. We cannot find a more significant example of an understanding which went beyond even the modern scientific imaginary, despite its technological advances, and it was only Quantum Physics that recovered this understanding of the world which surpasses the limitations imposed by a particular research field.

Kosmos, the Perfect Animal and Chaos, the Abyss

After Heraclitus other cosmologies were produced, many of them having as the main theme the existence of some primordial stuff, thus continuing the way of understanding produced by the Milesian School. But with Plato a description of world was sketched that provides a different pattern in describing the world order: *perfect animal-like world*.

In the *Timaeus*, Plato provides a description of the world as a living being created by the Demiurge who follows an eternal pattern. This higher instance, named by Plato “Demiurge” is not Creator but like a craftsman, since he makes the world following the eternal patterns². The ordered-world is the result, in this model, of the ordering made by the Demiurge upon the pre-existent materials. *Kosmos* is an image of the perfection of the Eternal Ideas and order is the manifestation of this resemblance with the model. More exactly, the principle of order is manifested by putting intelligence in soul and soul in body. The main characteristic of soul is to have motion in itself, the motion being the action of putting order in the world. But what kind of order?

For a better understanding of the meaning of order in Plato’s texts, I will analyze the difference between order and disorder in the Greek horizon before Plato. The notion of disorder is the lowest status that the Greeks conceived regarding Being, the non-existence was something used in logic or in demonstrations (the Eleatic School) but not as reference to pre-existence, to before-Being. Rather, what was conceivable for the Greeks as primeval state of existence received the name of “Chaos”, a state of emptiness that, as in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, should be understood as the abyss of Tartarus, the underworld. We have here a different view from Buddhism, for example, where the notion of non-existence plays a central role. Yet, later, it was a tendency to reinterpret the meaning of chaos, the accent being put not on the emptiness, but on disorder; the Abyss is a formless mass. This change of accent in the interpretation of a mythological theme should be connected with mutations in the Greek mind, dictated by life in the *Polis*. The *Polis* was organized after some new patterns, like having the *Agora* in the center, etc., a major disruption with Near Orient’s old cities.

In Plato’s *Dialogues*, the notion of chaos has a very interesting description if we try to think it from the order-disorder duality perspective. Chaos is no more an emptiness or even a pure disorder, but a kind of order that lacks or survives the superimposition of Forms. So, in this description, the chaos is always possible to arise, to reoccur, chaos is the undermining of a certain order. The order is the result of the Ideas’ action (Proto-Types)

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² Plato, *Timaeus*, 28a.

on the unformed matter, and this action is described as being according to *Ratio*. So, the order-disorder duality takes now the shape of rational-non-rational duality. Disorder, as non-rational, is in fact an order that lacks or avoids the imposition of Ideas. This order according to Logos is, thus, dynamic. A dynamism associated by Plato with life and intelligence. For this reason Plato's *kosmos* exhibits a dynamic quality quite alien to modern thought. The Demiurge creates a living and intelligent world because life is better than non-life and intelligent life is better than mere life. It is "the perfect animal."³ In contrast with the Darwinian view that the emergence of life and mind are accidents of evolution, Plato holds that the world is *necessarily* alive and intelligent. To be alive means to have soul, and the Athenian thinker make use of a very interesting and important distinction between several kinds of souls, the rational one, the spirited one and the plantlike one. (Today one of the biggest challenges for science is to understand life, and this distinction begins to be a possible methodological strategy in addressing this question.) The highest form of soul is, according to the Greek way of conceiving superior levels of existence, self-motioned and, because of that, eternal (even if it also shares in the other two kinds of soul). So we have an equivalence between rational, alive, self-motioned and eternal attributes in describing a higher level of perfection. All these characteristics were put together and Plato named the ultimate reality *animal*.

The Perfect Sphere

This understanding of perfection is an assumption in describing order and comprises degrees since the world-animal is not a perfect being inasmuch as it includes the lower types of soul, that is, the lower types of order. There are degrees of order and also degrees of disorder because of this multi-level constitution of the world-animal. We recognize this conceiving of perfection as geometrical order; and this is the heritage of the Eleatic School: the uniqueness of Being, sphere as the perfect geometrical form, a shape that should not be nor finite, nor infinite. The sphere is the most like itself of all figures and that makes for the most beautiful figure. Sphere's movement toward something else is not possible because this perfect animal is a singularity, hence it has nowhere to move to, and that's why the perfect being has no external limbs or organs, it exists in itself. There is nothing outside its edges, so the world-animal can only move within its own limits, it can only rotate around its own axis. Continuing this description of perfection as a having a geometrical shape, Plato adds that since the *kosmos* is a perfect animal, and since an animal has parts,

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³ Plato, *Timaeus*, 31b.

the world is by necessity a perfect whole of perfect parts⁴. The circular motion of perfect animal is a symbol of perfection in Plato's texts. The ordered-world has perfection not only because of its highest symmetry, but also because of its perfect circular motions, the time being the moving image of eternity.

The New Paradigm: World's Description as Place of Personal Communion

Plato's conception of order was one of the most influential paradigms of the Classical and Late Antiquity. This platonic symbolism of perfection and order can be discovered as an assumption in elaboration of the major philosophies existing at the time when Christianity started to affirm. Of course, the Neo-Platonism is the most significant one. The importance of contemporary recuperation of the Christian Patristic perspective on person can have significant consequences on sciences, especially in their border zones, because this vision presents an understanding of person that supports explicitly a totally different dimension of the personal mode of existence. In this space the person is described as "active" on the ontic level, as having a radical influence on the created reality. Yannaras states that the person is, in principle, the only possible relation with beings, with the things that exist in reality. Beings exist only as *ob-jects* – namely, whatever exists does so only by relation to a person. This relation defines the existential character of beings as phenomena – beings *appear*, are manifested as what they *are* only as logos of their relation with the person⁵.

This understanding can also offer a rich answer to the question about human freedom, to the question of how this freedom can be described and understood. If the signification of freedom were to go beyond the borders of moral and moralizing discourse, then a consistent description of the effectiveness of the person's influence must be offered, from the perspective of the relationship between freedom and determinism. One question should be answered first: how can the status of a person, and the framework of the personal mode of existence, be described? We have already pointed out that the static description of a person, or the description in terms of an essence, is excluded. The person is not a static reality; it is something that can be intuited. However, what we might call *dynamism* in this case is not simple to describe or frame. This dynamism is not similar to flux or flow; it is something more radical, an ontic dynamism. The person is a reality that "does not stand" in its very fundamental grounds. It "moves", i.e. it "is in the making", it becomes that which it was not.

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⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*, 37b,c.

⁵ Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, Trans. Norman Russell (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), 21.

In this anthropology man is not; he *becomes*, for he is called to go beyond himself, to be united with a nature beyond himself and all creation: to be united with God and, to a certain extent and with a certain meaning, *to become God*. The apophatism of the person is a phrase that must be interpreted in the light of this latter statement. The language of negation is more appropriate when one aims to talk about something that ceaselessly makes oneself and is beyond oneself in union with something above the self. Yet one must add that this calling and this proper feature of the person does not point to a single path, because everything is discussed within the limits of identity, of the unrepeatability, of unity. Nothing else exists but concrete persons and the concrete, unique and unrepeatable experience of each of them. The interpersonal conjugation of a human being's various movements depends on the human being as such. The human being is lived in reality by persons. Although each person has inside the whole human being, each person lives the whole human being in relation with other persons, or makes it real in relation with other persons. This is why the experience of living the whole human being by each person, is united with the increase in the experience of living of the whole being by itself, in its own way, via the relation with other persons, who live it in their own way⁶.

Communion as Union of Different Natures

Persons are not conditioned in their experience, nor are they given, via any determination, the content of the experience of living and its orientation. We are dealing here with more than a psychological description of feelings (that could be determined), because the experience of living, as a fundamental state of the personal mode of existence, means much more. The purpose of this personal, unique "experience", does not simply aim at enriching the experience of man, but it aims to create existential openings towards a reality beyond the self. Freedom is expressed in everybody's capacity to open towards that *Someone* who calls them, but who does not oblige them in any way to achieve communion. "The work of the Spirit as person in us requires our free collaboration, which shows once again the importance that God gives us as persons. The Spirit requires from us to take possession of His work and make it our own through our own will and work. The Spirit does not force anyone, i.e. the Spirit does not cancel out the will that He Himself, as God, gave us through creation. He does not cancel it out because He Himself is free of all passions, including the

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⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Studii de teologie dogmatică ortodoxă (Studies of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology)* (Craiova: Ed. Mitropoliei Craiovei, 1990), 224.

passion to rule. Freedom is the most proper characteristic feature of the Spirit, of the authentic, supreme Spirit⁷.

Yet the communion between man and his Creator implies the paradoxical union of different natures. This situation invites a lot of things to say and to think of, at least as much as such a paradoxical situation can be put into words. Melchisedec Törönen asks, for instance, if there is a mutual interpenetration of natures or just a penetration of the human nature by the divine⁸. This *deification* of man or *theandria* means that what we call freedom is not something that has been simply given to man; it has degrees, and levels, that correspond to this human-divine communion that is dynamic and existential. Although man, as personal reality, has freedom by his very constitution, the manifestation of this freedom supposes something more or something less; it supposes a certain way of becoming actual that cannot be presupposed beforehand. Or, when human powers are degraded, when the effects of the *Fall* become manifest, the actualization of freedom is limited; it is marked by the limit of the inauthentic, of the improper (the sign of the *Fall*). The specific notion of *perfection*, that is typical for Orthodox spirituality, implies this way of increasing freedom. This is why the path towards perfection is a central topic in the Patristic spirituality.

Mediation, Unification, *Transitus*: Order as an Indefinite Progress of Endless Virtualities

According to patristic exegesis, the Fall of Adam and Eve, those nominated to rule over all Creation, brought about another state of the world, of the cosmos, affecting its each and every last stone. This conditioning that man, via his thickened body, starts to receive from nature is, after all, an effect of his own deeds. The fallen man's actual life on the earth means suffering and the pursuit of deliverance. This state has concrete consequences in man's complex relationship with what is called nature, and which includes his own corporeality. Christ's embodiment means the possibility to restore man's humanity, but only as something potential. This restoration becomes real in the concrete case of each man not identically, but in agreement with the characteristic features of the uniqueness of each personal exercise of the freedom *to be*. The restoration must not be understood as man's return to that which is proper to him, to his lost existential state; this change leads to another relationship and another

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⁷ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă (Treaty of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology)*, vol. II (București: Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al B. O. R., 1997), 149.

⁸ Melchisedec Törönen, *Union and Distinction in the Thought of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 122.

way to exercise his influence upon nature. This change of relationship must be understood as real and not symbolic, as one that produces real and concrete effects in nature. The Patristic texts highlight the fact that this is how man opens endless possibilities to bring about change and novelty in nature. This does not imply the flouting of nature's laws and rationality, but contributing to actualize the potencies that it contains and that otherwise would have never become manifest. The patristic vision of the world is that it was created as *a setting*, as the *site* of encounter between persons.

The world does not have a meaning and a purpose in itself; it exists with a view to creating deeper and more effective possibilities for encounter between persons – between the Persons of the Holy Trinity and people, as well as between people. This is so because the person is the reality of the highest degree of existence, because he/she is aware of her existence and of the existence of persons and things. This is also so because the person exists as *I*, as *you* or as *he/she*, as a conscience aiming towards another conscience⁹. Thus, the determinism of nature, the existence of some laws of physical reality, is not an eternal given; it was modified when Adam fell and it encounters continuous changes by the exercise of human's act of freedom, especially of the wo/man who is on the path of restoration.

It would be more appropriate to talk not so much about *natural laws* as about the rationality of the world, or, to be more precise, the *rationality of creation*. When we talk about the rationality of the world we give a more adequate expression to the purposes for which the world received its existence, a world which cannot have, under any circumstances, a purpose and a meaning in itself, or could simply exist. If there are limits in Creation, and if they are not due to human's Fall, then the understanding of the limit must be positive: it is a limit that creates the possibility of communion, of the encounter, and that proves to engender an infinity of possibilities. This would be the meaning of some reasons of creation, of some *logoi*, as Maximus the Confessor calls them. Wo/Man's aim is definitely to overcome conditionings; this fact is apparent in the whole historical behavior of humanity. Throughout his whole history on Earth, the human being has attempted, by all means, to go beyond his own conditionings, dependences and limitations. The fact that he does science pertains to this need as well. According to Maximus, wo/man has a high calling: to mediate and to unite. As Paul Blowers remarks, Maximus considers that the human being is called to consistently integrate the macrocosm with the microcosm, the objective perspective with the subjective one, in a common vision of spiritual *transitus*.

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⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Studii de teologie dogmatică ortodoxă (Studies of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology)* (Craiova: Ed. Mitropoliei Craiovei, 1990), 225.

The natural tension in the macrocosm between sensitive and intelligible reality must be mediated in the human microcosm via the spiritual vocation that is proper to those of ascetic practice and contemplation, this being a higher understanding of world order¹⁰. This mediation and unification asks for an *actual* change in reality, at all levels, for a subtle modification of a constitutive element in each of mediation's terms, this being considered as the road to an order understood as being more and different than a finite/definite perfection. In the Patristic thinking, order is an indefinite progress in actualization of endless virtualities/possibilities, as a result of a synergic act between God and Wo/Man through *logoi*. This understanding of order offers very interesting insights for today's provocations of a globalized world in finding answers not only to the world's rationality (the ontological level), but as much for describing a dynamic and existential ideal for the social order. In different cultural and religious areas people act different because of different actualizations of particular virtualities. The modern myth of rational and universal social order, based on the presupposition of an identical and universal human rational capacity for understanding and acting, proves to be dangerous rather than insufficient. Today's social and geo-political realities are the most evident confirmation of this ideal's failure, and we need now a much more comprehensive paradigm of understanding individual and social behavior, not as something universal, but in fact grounded on the core values provided by a particular cultural horizon. That's why explanatory models like those provided by the Patristic thinking should be very much considered because of much more complex capabilities.

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¹⁰ Paul M. Blowers, *Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy in Maximus the Confessor. An investigation of the Quaestiones ad Thalassium* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, Indiana, 1991), p. 131.