

Choosing Our Cosmology for the Sacred Earth: Plato's Two Worlds Revisited

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Environmental philosophers' and educators' interest in cosmology is not new and has in fact been receiving increasing attention. Basically, the interest stems from the realization that how we treat the world has everything to do with how we perceive it, that is, what we think the world is like. In other words, our relationship to and treatment of a thing is predicated on our conception of the thing: its essential and circumstantial attributes. If we have a negative conception of something, our actions towards it will necessarily enact this conception and result in damage to this object. Hence, if we want to change our relationship to and treatment of an object — in the present case, the natural world — then, fundamentally, we have to revise our conception of the natural world. David Orr, to whom Huey-li Li refers several times in the paper, has encapsulated this understanding in his memorable assessment that the environmental crisis stems from a metaphysical disordering of the mind.¹ Environmental education, therefore, will have to be a philosophical, or to be more precise, a metaphysical task of reshaping the mind, perception, and values. What kind of metaphysical resources do we have for this task?

Li proposes Plato's cosmology as a possible resource for our task. Indeed, listening to Li's exposition of Plato's cosmology, we can easily see that, unbelievable as it might at first appear, Plato's cosmology has several features that are amenable to our need for an eco-friendly metaphysics. The first feature is, in the words of Li, the "correspondence between the living world and the world of Forms." Here it is important that we secure the background understanding that the world of Forms is eternal, perfectible, and rational or intelligible. It is the Platonic noumenal world of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. According to Plato's metaphysics, the phenomenal world, to which Nature belongs, reflects, or corresponds to, the world of Forms. By virtue of this correspondence, Nature, too, is good, beautiful, and so on, although, of course, not as perfectly or absolutely as the world of Forms. In other words, if Nature is good and beautiful, and therefore is worthy of our valuing, it is because Nature is an embodiment, however imperfect, of the noumenal world of Forms. That there is some problem with this sort of valuing is a point that I will explore below.

Allow me to ask some critical questions about the nature of correspondence or reflection. From Li's and other scholars' interpretation, I get the impression that the correspondence that exists between the world of Forms and the phenomenal world is like the reflection in a mirror. The phenomenal world is only the mirror reflection of the noumenal, and even so, an imperfect reflection, full of distortions. Thus the correspondence between the two is not a mutual affair: it is completely unidirectional, from the noumenal to the phenomenal. As a power relationship, that is, a relationship between the participants that involves the dynamics of exerting

influence and incurring consequences as a result of their actions, a non-mutual relationship tends to precipitate domination, subjugation, and exploitation. For, non-mutuality of power dynamics implies lack of parity in the counter and exchange of influences. The direction of power is always from the powerful to the powerless and helpless. (This does not mean that the currently powerless cannot manage to reverse the direction of power, however subtly or limitedly, and start to exert power in such a way as to disrupt the status quo. All that shows, however, is that power relationships are not static but dynamic and that we can always disrupt the status quo so that the positions of power and privilege switch.) The phenomenal has no power, hence no influence, on the noumenal. The former is completely helpless before the noumenal, just as a mirror is completely “helpless” in having to reflect, passively, all the images thrown onto it.

Given this initial and permanent set-up, if there is any worth to the mirror images, it is only borrowed, second-hand worth. These mirrored images that comprise the phenomenal world cannot have inherent reality. Only the Objects in the world of Forms are real and have inherent worth. Thus, the corresponding image-objects in the phenomenal world only have apparent or virtual value. Given this understanding, what would be the moral status of such less-than-real objects? How strong would our moral obligations to them be? I doubt very much that we would entertain strong moral status toward our phenomenal objects and feel strong moral obligations to respect, love, and care about them. In other words, we would not feel compelled to value these phenomenal objects intrinsically, that is, to value them in themselves and for themselves. Our gaze toward them is always an attempt to go beyond them, to get past them, to reach the noumenal, in which case, we may value them instrumentally. At most, these objects of the phenomenal world are a door or window into the noumenal; at worst, they are obstacles to our reaching the noumenal, in which case, we need to remove or destroy them.

Against this interpretation, some, including Li, would argue that the relationship between the noumenal and the phenomenal is not so one-sided and uni-directional, and that there is a dimension of interaction between them. Thus, Li attempts to understand correspondence between the two worlds more as an interactive process wherein the world of Forms penetrates the phenomenal objects (the world-body) and imbues them with the essence of the world Forms (the world-soul). Li explains that this process renders the world-body, that is, the phenomenal world “intelligible,” amenable to our reasoning or thinking faculty. Thus, the way the correspondence is set up, the phenomenal world is not separate from the world of Forms; moreover, it is intelligible to us through our having the knowledge of Forms, specifically, what is good and beautiful. In other words, it is only because we have the knowledge of Forms (the Good and Beautiful) that we can truly appreciate the phenomenal world. But I must ask, once again, where is the interaction, the mutual influence here? Yes, there is the penetration of the noumenal into the phenomenal, but is the reverse happening, too? Not in Plato’s Kosmos. The phenomenal world only reflects images off the real Objects in the noumenal world. True, the phenomenal world is not, cannot be, separate from the noumenal world, but the converse is not the case. There is no mutuality to the connection between the two worlds.

Plato may not like this interpretation, but I see the connection between the noumenal and the phenomenal as one between the conceptual or rational and the ontological or empirical, that is, between the world and the word. Historically, this connection has been an enduring philosophical object of contemplation and debate. Plato's position marks the inception of the rationalist position. Roughly speaking, the rationalist position is characterized by the priority of the conceptual (that is, the knowledge of Forms) over the empirical. The empirical becomes intelligible through the conceptual's being superimposed on it. By contrast, the empiricist position is marked by the priority of the ontological over the conceptual, or of the empirical over the rational. The conceptual is derived from the ontological by way of observation and generalization. In my view, neither by itself is a satisfactory account of how we come to know about the world, or, more relevant to us here, how we should conceive of our ethical obligations toward the phenomenal world. What ecology demands of us is a sacred, ethical relationship with Nature, marked by intrinsic valuing. If we take this demand seriously and want to see Nature as sacred, having inherent value, and deserving of our intrinsic valuing, then we have to reject the Platonic one-sided or one-directional, non-mutual relation between what there is (ontology) and how we see and know (epistemology) the world. Instead, we should seek ways to see the world that enable us to value the world intrinsically.

To value something intrinsically is to value something as an end in itself, for its sheer existence, which is markedly different from instrumentalist valuing wherein we value something because it fits and suits our purposes. While we cannot have a relationship with the world based solely on intrinsic valuing, what is important is that we have a good balance between the two ways of valuing. In fact, the more the balance tips toward intrinsic valuing, the better will be our ethical and spiritual relationship with the world. Practically speaking, the ideal is to align the intrinsic and instrumental in such a way that the two interpenetrate each other. I would also like to point out that a supreme example of intrinsic valuing is the aesthetic appreciation of things, which is a whole person response involving the sensuous, perceptual, bodily, and intellectual dimensions of a person. In short, the Platonic intellectual apprehending that the knowledge of Forms calls for is not enough to support intrinsic valuing.

It is my contention that the engendering of a sacred, intrinsic relationship with the earth calls for the deepest love that human beings are capable of, and such love is the work of all our senses, body, mind, heart, and soul, or however one may wish to characterize the whole person. The Platonic emphasis on the rational or conceptual is therefore limiting, although not entirely useless. Its usefulness lies chiefly in its critical ability to diagnose what has gone wrong in the way we conceive of the world and our place in it, and to prescribe possibilities for a different world. But theory does not turn into a road. What we need is an education of the heart and body, soul and mind, whereby we learn to love the world sensuously, heart-fully, soul-fully, wisely, and of course, intelligently.

1. See David Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994), 2.