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# Law, Philosophy, and Civil Theodicy: An Interpretation of Plato's Epinomis

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Law, Philosophy, and Civil Theodicy:  
An Interpretation of Plato's *Epinomis*

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Scholars have mostly neglected Plato's *Epinomis*. To my knowledge no one has attempted an interpretation of the dialogue as a whole in recent memory. In part this is because some scholars have argued that the *Epinomis* was not written by Plato. However, this is not the opinion of many prominent Plato scholars of the last century and a half. For example, George Grote, Paul Friedlander, A.E. Taylor, and Paul Shorey all considered it an authentic Platonic dialogue. Additionally, its authenticity was hardly doubted by ancient commentators. The main argument made for its not being authentic is not interpretational but alleged stylistic and philological differences with other, well established platonic dialogues, must notably the *Laws*.

To these criticism Taylor responds, who himself translated the dialogue, "I can detect no linguistic difference whatever between the style of the *Epinomis* and the *Laws*, and the very fact that the *Laws* have manifestly not received even the trifling editorial revision which would have removed small verbal inaccuracies and contradictions makes it incredible to me that Plato's immediate disciples should have issued as his the work of one of themselves. Hence I am confident that the current suspicion of the dialogue is no more than a prejudice really due to the now exploded early nineteenth century attacks on the genuineness of the *Laws* themselves."<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, the prolix style and perplexing arguments have no doubt deterred many from attempting to explain it who consider it a genuine work. I believe that the prolixity is a key to understanding the work. I will argue that it is the culmination of the discussion started in Plato's *Laws*, as it appears to be, because it explains two topics mentioned briefly in the *Laws* but left inadequately explained: the purpose or study of the "nocturnal council", and the civil theodicy of the city outlined in the *Laws* the foundation of which was established in book ten.

*Epinomis*, the title of the dialogue, could be translated a number of different ways. Each reveals a different aspect of the dialogue. It could read "After the laws" with a temporal sense meaning literally a discussion taking place after the daylong discussion of the *Laws*. This is certainly apposite. The *Epinomis* was sometimes referred to as "book thirteen" of the *Laws* by ancient commentators. It continues the discussion in the *Laws*. *Epinomis* could also be translated as "Above (or Beyond) the laws". This also makes sense, for the *Epinomis* discusses topics beyond simply the laws, in particular the theodicy briefly delineated in book ten of the *Laws* and the metaphysical foundation of the laws. Finally, *epi* as a preposition in Greek can sometimes mean against or contrary to. This reflects the most subtle but also most important theme, namely the discussion of the so called "nocturnal council", which, among other things, was responsible for rehabilitating those who denied the existence of the gods and stood against or in contradistinction to the city and its laws.

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<sup>1</sup> Plato: *The Man and His Works*, p. 497-498. For the most comprehensive study and defense of the authenticity of the *Epinomis*, to my knowledge, see Taylor's *Plato and the Authorship of the 'Epinomis'*.

Kleinias begins the discussion by saying that the three men who had met the day before and discussed the best type and arrangement of laws (himself, the Athenian Stranger, and the Spartan Megillus) have now reconvened in order to “examine whatever it is necessary to go through in speech concerning prudence (*phronēsis*) (973a3).”<sup>2</sup> It seems he is referring to continuing a discussion alluded to at the end of the *Laws* when the Athenian Stranger charged Kleinias with reconvening the group to discuss “the education and upbringing” of the rulers of the city outlined in the *Laws* (965a4-5). In other words, the three men are now to discuss the details, or some aspects of, a special council mentioned a few times in the *Laws*, the so-called “nocturnal council”.<sup>3</sup>

What is the nocturnal council? It is somewhat vaguely mentioned twice in the *Laws* (909a3-4, 968a7), once in book ten while discussing the punishment, or more precisely rehabilitation, of certain types of criminals, those who doubt the existence of the gods by “using arguments approaching philosophizing.” Later the same council seems to be referred to again when a special council that meets to discuss possible revision to the laws as well as investigating any subjects that “might seem” to contribute to the inquiry into the laws is argued for by the Athenian Stranger. Although it is not precisely clear that it is the same council, both are to meet very early in the morning before sunrise. Hence, they are “nocturnal” councils, therefore secret meetings to which the city as a whole is left both figuratively and literally in the dark. The secretive nature of the council is reflected by the rather ambiguous and subtle way it is discussed in the *Laws*. Not surprising, the discussion in the *Epinomis* is equally or even more perplexing and ambiguous.<sup>4</sup> The first step to making sense of it is to think through more clearly what exactly the nocturnal council is and what it does.

The nocturnal council is essentially a way of allowing for or introducing philosophy into the city limned in the *Laws*, which is mostly closed to philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Flaumenhaft remarks, “The Athenian says that if the city lacked such a council it would be like a human being without a head...”<sup>6</sup> In book ten of the *Laws* the Athenian Stranger introduces the problem that some citizens will not believe in the gods of the city. The Athenian Stranger, thereby, in the name of a supposed atheist or subvert, makes arguments against the gods, which, when examined, indicate that there are, in fact, very

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from the Greek are my own from Plato. *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet. Oxford University Press. 1903.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis argues, following a suggestion by Marrow, that “nocturnal council” is not an accurate translation of the actual Greek phrase *nukterinos sullogos*, because *sullogos*, the word translated as council (more commonly *eklaesia*), is more like an informal meeting (“The Nocturnal Council and Political Philosophy”, *History of Political Thought* Vol. XIX. No. 1. Spring 1998, pp1-20, p. 3-4, n7.)

<sup>4</sup> “The chief reason for doubting Plato’s authorship is the obscurity and abstract prolixity of the style, or at any rate of many sentences, which goes far beyond any parallels that may be fairly cited from the *Laws* (Shorey 408).” What accounts for “the obscurity and abstract prolixity” is the subject matter, which must be discussed in a subtle, ambiguous way.

<sup>5</sup> This is disputed by a few scholars, principally George Klosko, “The Nocturnal Council in Plato’s *Laws*”, *Political Studies*, 36 (1988). pp. 74-88, but maintained by most Plato scholars, most recently Lewis, “The Nocturnal Council and Political philosophy,” who argues, “The Athenian stranger outlines a regime which is at once conservative and radical: it is conservative in that its core is a legal code which is vested with a sacred aura and made very difficult to change; it is radical in that it includes within itself the means of its own transcendence. That means is the practice of philosophy by the body whose name is usually translated as the ‘nocturnal council’. p. 3)

<sup>6</sup> “The Silence of the Spartan”, p. 75.

good reasons for doubting the gods of the city.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, these atheists undergo a rigorous education which ostensibly, to the eyes of the city that is, is a rigorous apologetic of the theology of the city. In reality this education may well be a rigorous examination of not so much the truth of the theology, but the political utility of the theology, i.e. why it is necessary that the city has religion and why the theology has been fashioned the way it has.<sup>8</sup> As Aristotle puts it commenting on the *Laws* in the second book of the *Politics*, the Athenian Stranger “brings the regime around by degrees towards that of the *Republic* (1265a8-10).” Just as in the *Republic* the theology of the poets had to be edited and to a large degree refashioned by the philosophers, this too must occur in the *Laws*, albeit in secret, by the nocturnal council.

Since the *Laws*, unlike the *Republic*, is meant to be a regime and discussion of a regime that is actually plausible, i.e. that could actually be adopted by a real city, the discussion of this aspect of the city, the need and place for philosophy and the subordination of theology to philosophy, must necessarily be rather vague. It cannot be as explicit as it was in the *Republic*. This is evident by the fact that whereas the *Republic* takes place at night and outside the city, i.e. it is a secret discussion of sorts, the *Laws* is an open discussion in broad daylight, i.e. a discussion that must be public and take into account the discretion necessary of public discussions if it is meant to be actually adopted by a real city.

Where and when does the *Epinomis* take place? That is to say, where does the *Epinomis* fall on this issue of discretion and openness? It is not immediately clear. The conversation that took place in the *Laws*, presumably, took the course of an entire day. It is reasonable that the *Epinomis* resumes the discussion the following morning just as the interlocutors in the *Theaetetus* are supposed to have met after a day’s interval at the opening of the *Sophist* and the *Timaeus* on the morning after Socrates has explained the workings of the *kallipolis* in the *Republic*. But do they meet before daybreak, as the actual nocturnal council was supposed to, or after? It is not said. It seems we are left in the dark. Yet, since Kleinias and Megillus are not philosophers, it cannot be much like an actual meeting of the nocturnal council. Therefore, it is, presumably, a discussion in broad daylight, just like the *Laws*. Consequently, we should expect that the Athenian Strangers’ remarks will carry the same discretion and concomitant ambiguity and subtly as they did in the *Laws*. In fact, this will be so to an even greater degree, since he is discussing the most secret and radical part of the city.

The first seeming ambiguity is the seeming topic to be discussed introduced by Kleinias: “whatever it is necessary to go through in speech concerning prudence (*phronēsis*) (973a3).” However, Kleinias subsequently says, “However, the greatest thing to discover and speak of, whatever a mortal man by learning would be wise (*sophos*), this neither have we spoken of nor discovered.” Consequently, from Kleinias’

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Pangle, “Interpretive Essay” in *Plato’s Laws* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 506.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Pangle, “The Political Psychology of Religion in Plato’s *Laws*”, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Dec., 1976), pp. 1059-1077, p. 1061-1062.

opening remarks it is not clear whether the education to be discussed is to aim at *phronēsis* or *sophia*. Or are they more or less equivalent or interchangeable?<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, it is hard to see any difference in Kleinias' own understanding and use of the terms. Also, the Athenian Stranger uses them both, but I think, not understanding them the same way. Although the Athenian Stranger in no way makes clear the difference to Kleinias, consideration of the context of the terms, I suggest, shows their distinction. The Athenian Stranger only uses wisdom in referring to understanding the theodicy he goes through in the first part of the dialogue. When it comes to the supplemental studies, discussed intermittently but mainly in the second half, those that aim at philosophy and understanding the true causes of all things, he uses only prudence. Consequently, wisdom in the sense of full and complete knowledge of the first causes of all things seems only possible in terms of understanding the fabricated theology of the city, not the true underlying causes of all things, that which the theology professes to explain. In regard to this, knowledge of the true causes of all things, it is not clear that it is possible, which he subtly suggests by repeated impasses to discovering the wisdom they are looking for. What is attainable, it seems, is a certain knowledge of what is good for humans qua humans, which is prudence, which is actually the condition necessary for the wisdom as the Athenian Stranger understands it.

This relationship of prudence to wisdom foreshadows Aristotle's discussion of these intellectual virtues in book six of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which seems to me influenced or at any rate very similar to how they are discussed in the *Epinomis*.<sup>10</sup> Aristotle discusses five intellectual virtues: *technē*, *epistēmē*, *phronēsis*, *nous*, and *sophia*. *Phronēsis* and *sophia* are the central and last virtues respectively. *Phronēsis* is said to be the virtue of understanding the human good (1140b20-21), whereas *sophia* is "the foremost knowledge (*epistēmē*) of the most honored things (*timiōtaton*) (1141a19-20)". At first glance it seems that prudence is subordinate to wisdom, which is how many commentators have understood it. This interpretation is implied by Aristotle's subsequent discussion of deliberation where he seems to argue that the virtue of prudence does not deliberate about ends, presumably the subject of wisdom, but only about means (1142b37-40).

However, Ruderman points out that this is in fact a mistranslation of the Greek phrase in question *pros to telos* (1113b3-4; see also 1145a4-5, 1112b12, 1113a13-4) usually translated as "means to an end", but should more accurately be understood as "what is toward the end".<sup>11</sup> Ruderman goes on to argue that prudence must deliberate about ends, because more often than not there are conflicting ends. The statesman who has prudence must choose between ends, knowing which to pursue, when, how, in what way, etc.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, Ruderman concludes, "Prudence, then, does partake of theory or philosophy."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This seems to be the opinion of those who have translated it into English none of whom make any indication of when, exactly, each term is being used.

<sup>10</sup> This is not the only theme in the dialogue further developed by Aristotle, e.g. aether (or the fifth element) as several scholars have observed (e.g. Shorey 408).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Ruderman, "Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Political Judgment", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (Jun., 1997), pp. 409-420, p 416.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The discussion of prudence is the most involved and nuanced of all the intellectual virtues in book six. It turns out that there are different types of prudence, or subsets of prudence (1141b30-32). One type, the first to come to light and discussed, is simply that of the good statesman who understands the human good and how to bring it about in certain circumstances. However, there turns out to be a higher sort of prudence, that of a legislator or founder, those who make and order the laws, which requires an understanding of the human good in relation to the whole or all things, and therefore a type of prudence which resembles in a way wisdom. It is the type that the Athenian Stranger must have to make the argument he did in the *Laws* and the one he subsequently makes in the *Epinomis*. Arguably, this could, in fact, be the highest obtainable intellectual virtue, and wisdom, to the extent it is obtainable, is really only a knowledge of the whole in as much as it relates to the human good.<sup>14</sup> This seems to be suggested and comes to light in the *Epinomis* in as much as the legislator delineates “wisdom” in the sense of designing the civil theology.

The Athenian Stranger begins his discussion by remarking that the human race is neither blessed nor happy (973c1). Life is accompanied with pains at virtually every stage. No one, save a few, can obtain bliss. This reminds us of his remark in the *Laws* that the city is “the truest tragedy” (817b7). While Kleinias and Megillius agree, knowing as old men that life is indeed filled with many pains, in light of the theology the Athenian Stranger is about to unfold he probably means this in a different light. Life is tragic, for most men, in the sense that it is based on a flawed version of the whole, more precisely on the delusion that they have knowledge of the whole, which is their religious faith, which is actually the absence of philosophy: life without philosophy, as it is for the majority of men, is tragic from the Athenian Stranger’s point of view.

Next the Athenian Stranger proceeds to examine all the known arts and sciences to see if any can teach the knowledge they are looking for. All fall short. This is reminiscent of Socrates’ remark in the *Apology* that he visited the artisans in search of knowledge only to find that they did indeed have knowledge, but not the kind he sought (22c9-d4). In fact, their type of knowledge proved detrimental to the sort he sought to the extent that in fixating on technical expertise of a particular type they lost sight of the whole and thereby even the possibility of philosophy, that is to say the wonder at the sense of a whole that is the beginning of philosophy (Aristotle *Metaphysics* 980a21). The failure of any of the known arts and sciences to teach wisdom points to, or clears the way for, theology, or more precisely the need for theology and why many men believe it. Theology supplies the knowledge of the whole, the causes for all things, which all men in some sense seek, but is not sufficiently supplied by any other art or science (974a8).

Finally, the Athenian Stranger turns to numbers (*arithmoi*) as a science that seems to contribute to the wisdom they are looking for (976e1). The use of numbers and the art

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<sup>14</sup> David Bolotin, in his analysis of Aristotle’s *Physics* and cosmology in general, concludes that “What emerges from the contrast between Aristotle’s surface teaching and his genuine views is that in the former he presented the natural world as being far more completely intelligible than he believed it was.” Bolotin goes on to argue that Aristotle’s true insights about the world are found, not in his natural philosophy, but his political philosophy, “above all in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*” [*An Approach to Aristotle’s Physics: with particular attention to the role of his manner of writing* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), p151-153.] This would mean that really prudence, not wisdom, is the highest type of intellectual virtue.

of calculating incites a sense of precision and wholeness. This is reflected in their contribution to music and rhythm, which the Athenian Stranger notes, no doubt especially in regard to music in religious ceremonies, recalling the discussion at the opening of the *Laws*. To this extent, Kleinias and Megillius can see the importance of numbers and agree with the Stranger's remark.

However, the Athenian Stranger has another use of numbers in mind. Numbers are universal. They transcend the conventions of particular cities. While knowledge of numbers is useful for the arts, the Athenian Stranger does not emphasize this, but rather its use in studying the movements of the constellations, literally the highest things (978b1, a1). Consequently, to study numbers in the manner the Athenian Stranger suggests is actually to begin to turn to a type of knowledge that is not promulgated by and for the use of the city. It is to begin to transcend the city and move toward philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

The Athenian Stranger attributes knowledge of number and calculation to the gift of god, not any of the Athenian gods, but the highest god Uranus (*ouranon*) or simply the Heavens, which is the "most just of all the spirits and gods (977a3)".<sup>16</sup> Kleinias has been prepared by this rather unorthodox claim, which has the tacit effect of demoting the Olympian gods and prepares the way for a more rational, cosmopolitan theology (a theology that will be more open to philosophy) by the discussion in book ten of the *Laws*. When the Athenian Stranger had mentioned that some citizens may not believe there are gods, Kleinias himself had pointed to the "beautiful orderliness" of the heavens, "the earth, sun, stars, all things," and "of the seasons" (886a1-5). Introducing god in this way is how the Athenian Stranger subtly introduces the topic of theology and thereby allows for a subtle, but nonetheless radical, refashioning of conventional Greek theology.

The Athenian Stranger then turns to the question of how humans ever learned to count. This he attributes to observing the rotation of the heavens, the changing of day to night, the waxing and waning of the moon as well as observing the changing seasons (978d1-e3). In this way he draws attention away from necessity (and the practical demands that may be the true origins of arithmetic, e.g. warfare and trade) and thereby beyond the city itself. He then returns to the question of wisdom saying they "must make a better model of the genealogy of the gods and other living things than the previous ones (980c5)." By "previous ones" it is not clear whether he is referring to the conventional ideas adopted from the poets or the pre-Socratic philosophic explanations. Most likely, he means both. The conventional ideas are too closed to philosophy, and the pre-Socratic are apolitical, i.e. do not serve the needs of the city (and take into account man's need for and dependence upon politics). That is to say, the theology under discussion must in some way promote civic virtue, law-abidingness, service to the city, patriotism, etc.

This "better model" to "honor the gods" will seem to show that there are gods who care for everything great and small and are inexorable in their concern for justice (980d1). This argument begins along the lines of the argument in book ten of the *Laws*

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<sup>15</sup> This is also why math and science based on math poses a problem for the city. "Science or philosophy necessarily weakens the power of the national 'philosophies' and therewith the attachment of the citizens to the particular way of life, or the manners, or their community [Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 257]." This passage discusses Rousseau's political philosophy, but it is a problem Plato deals with as well. In fact, it is a problem that Rousseau, arguably, is made aware of through Plato.

<sup>16</sup> The Heavens is more accurate since he does not mean to imply anything like a personal, embodied god like the Athenian gods as becomes clear subsequently.

where we are reminded that soul must be first and older than body, the purpose of which was to refute the materialism of certain pre-Socratics (980d5). However, none of the perplexities and problems in that discussion are resolved.<sup>17</sup> The argument is taken at more or less face value to fashion “a better model of the genealogy of the gods.”

We soon learn that although soul is prior to body and in some sense responsible for bodies, there are nonetheless elements or “solid bodies (*sterea somata*)”. The Athenian Stranger says there are five and lists their characteristics (981c5). Thus, it turns out that the pre-Socratics are actually not completely rejected. Rather, the theology the Athenian Stranger is fashioning is a sort of compromise between the intransigent rationality demanded by philosophy and the needs of the city and most men who are not and cannot be philosophers.

The Athenian Stranger sets up a hierarchy with Uranus at the top and terrestrial beings at the bottom. In fact, Uranus is so far removed from men and their concerns that he “does not experience pain and pleasure” or change in anyway (985b1). In other words, in the final analysis Uranus turns out to be much like Aristotle’s unmoved mover. Without explicitly saying so, the Athenian Stranger has introduced a very impersonal, detached sort of god, who is characterized by nothing other than reason and order, which are thereby made the noblest, most admirable things.

Nonetheless, the Athenian Stranger is careful to say that the citizens are free to continue to believe in the conventional gods, Zeus, Hera, etc. (984d1). Further, although it tacitly comes to light that Uranus really does not care for humans in any personal way, i.e. provides only a sort of general providence in the sense of regulating the movements of the heavens, there are nonetheless “spirits (*daemonia*) between heaven and earth (985b4).” These are composed of nobler elements than the terrestrial beings and “partake of wondrous prudence” (984d4). These do feel pleasure and pain and are greatly pained by bad men and pleased by good and consequently work for the good of the good and ruin of the bad. Although they are “nearly invisible” to humans, they sometimes appear in dreams and at the end of life (984e2).

Consequently, the theology fashioned does provide the hope that there is supernatural support for justice, particularly in the sense of obeying the laws and serving the city, and supernatural punishment for criminals. Nonetheless, it allows for the fact that justice is not always forthcoming, because Uranus himself is beyond justice. Justice is really of concern only to humans and spirits, which are fallible. In the final analysis, it elevates reason and intelligence beyond the concern for justice and the pleasures and pains of this world, in a sense making all citizens more rational, but more importantly opening the way to philosophy for a few.

In fact, there are peculiarities in the theology that would make the more inquisitive wonder, inviting them to question the theology and ultimately see through it. For example, although Uranus is supposed be the ultimate principle or cause of the cosmos, the Athenian Stranger subsequently says that there are “three fates (*moirai*) that control and watch over” the cosmos, which “deliberate with the best council of the gods (982c4).” We are not told who these gods are. Are they the stars, which were said to be gods? But, these are subordinate to Uranus. Why, then, would they deliberate about the

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of these as well as the intention and significant of the metaphysics discussed in book ten see Pangle, *Plato’s Political Psychology*. I am much indebted to this article for pointing me in the right direction for understanding the *Epinomis*.



cosmos? More perplexing, where did the fates come from and what is their relationship to Uranus? Do they operate independent of him? In this case, Uranus is really not in ultimate control and there really would not be a sort of general providence but just competing powers or forces that account for the workings or motions of the cosmos to the extent that they are intelligible at all.

Further, although the Athenian Stranger encourages us to see the stars as gods, he says flatly that they may be just “noble images of the gods”. Thus, there could be merely one god, Uranos, who is a completely detached, impersonal intelligence. Finally, although he holds out the hope that there are spirits who promote justice in this world and watch over humans, helping the good and punishing the bad, he ends this discussion by saying simply that “it is not possible for mortal nature to know about such things (985d).” Does this include even the question of whether or not they exist? Could there be no supernatural support for justice at all?

In the final part of the dialogue the Athenian Stranger turns back to the “wisdom” they are seeking. This turns out to be “the greatest part of virtue, which is not properly practiced (989a),” which is “piety (*eusebeias*)”. The best natures can only become so with great difficulty (989b). He warns Kleinias and Megillius that it would be better not to be educated than to be improperly taught (989d). These warnings of its dangers and of the rare nature needed to undertake the pursuit of this virtue cannot help but remind us of Socrates’ discussion of the philosopher-kings in the *Republic*. They, too, must first of all possess a rare nature, good at and desirous of all sorts of learning, good memory, etc. More importantly, it is reminiscent of Socrates’ extensive discussion of how philosophy is not practiced correctly and leads to the corruption of the finest natures, which culminates in an analogy of the corrupted potential philosophers as a changling child (538a).

The Athenian Stranger then continues, “It is a strange thing to hear...the manner one will learn the proper reverence for the gods (990a).” Strange indeed because it has nothing to do with anything resembling traditional Greek piety, e.g. knowledge of the poets, sacrifices, sacred rites, study of divination (bird formations, entrails, etc). Rather, it actually more resembles the studies of pre-Socratic philosophy. Consequently, it is a study “that people would never suppose from inexperience in the matter (990a).” It turns out to be very similar to the curriculum outlined in book seven of the *Republic* for the potential philosophers. First is the study of arithmetic. Second is geometry (990c, cf. *Republic* 526a). Third is something the Athenian Stranger calls stereometry, which seems to be like the plane geometry discussed in the *Republic* although given an understandably more theological veneer by the Athenian Stranger (cf. 991a-b).

Finally, comes astronomy which proceeds to the understanding of “divine generation” (991c). Understandably, there is no mention of dialectic in the *Epinomis*, which is discussed at this point in the *Republic*, since as the Athenian Stranger presents it to Kleinias and Megellius there is more or less complete knowledge of the whole there is nothing to dispute, debate, and reason about from their point of view, the point of view of the city. Likewise, there is no discussion of knowledge of the ideas or the idea of the good, since the Athenian Stranger does not go so far as to totally replace conventional theology with the ideas as he does in the *Republic*. With this rather shadowy limn of

what the members of the nocturnal council will study, the Athenian stranger ends by saying simply that “all nocturnal council is called to this wisdom (992e).”

Thus, the *Epinomis* completes the discussion of Plato’s *Laws* by detailing more precisely the theodicy of the city and the education of the nocturnal council. It does so in a prolix and perplexing way because the Athenian Stranger cannot make too clear to Kleinias and Megellius what the true nature of the council is, namely philosophy, and the true intention of refashioning the theodicy, namely to make the city more rational and open the way to philosophy for a few. As Flaumenhaft puts it, “He can make philosophy safe for the city as he makes the city open to an image of philosophy that will open a part of the city to philosophy.”<sup>18</sup>

To this end, a theodicy is fashioned which is a sort of mean between conventional Greek piety and pre-Socratic concepts of the whole that are wholly apolitical. Consequently, there is some discussion of gods and spirits, but the highest god turns out to be impersonal and removed from the affairs of men, characterized only by reason and order. Subtle questions and problems with the theodicy are left unexplored and unanswered, nuances that will serve the purpose of leading the most thoughtful and inquisitive youth to be educated or “rehabilitated” by the nocturnal council.

Finally, the education of the council is discussed, which is said to be an education in the greatest virtue “piety”. This is, actually, in a sense, true, since the council will explore the theology in order to re-educate atheists. Nonetheless, the education discussed has nothing in common with conventional ideas of piety, e.g. divination, sacrifices, etc. Rather, it is very similar to the education of the philosophers in the *Republic*. In fact, considering the much more covert way it must be discussed in the *Epinomis*, it is most likely virtually identical.

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<sup>18</sup> “The Silence of the Spartan”, p82.

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