

Nomos, Kosmos & Dike in Plutarch

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EUNOMIA IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH. PLUTARCH'S *NOMOS* BETWEEN RHETORIC AND SCIENCE

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Abstract

Against the Epicureans, Plutarch holds that philosophy and religion are more important for society than statute laws. Given the analogy between the politician and the god-creator of the harmonious cosmos, rulers and their laws should, then, humbly imitate god and his divine law of Justice, thereby having only persuasion as a tool. It is argued that the rhetorical concept of persuasion plays an equally important role in the way the god, according to Plutarch (as a Platonist) has created the cosmos: divine persuasion overcame the laws of nature. The prescriptive character of this persuasion, however, conflicts with our modern concept of the descriptive character of physical laws.

1. Statute law and divine law: prescribing ethics

Statute laws, as a product of human legislation, are one of the cornerstones of democratic societies: they distinguish them from theocratic regimes, and, in that they are products of public debate, from aristocratic regimes that rule at their own discretion. Even more, according to Isocrates in his *Nicoles* 9, human legislation is a characteristic of, and even a condition for living in society: laws prescribe how individuals should behave when living together, and thus they set us free from the way of life of animals (τοῦ θηριωδῶς ζῆν). The Epicureans would agree to that. Colotes at least, in Plutarch's *Adversus Colotem* (1124D), affirms:

Those men who appointed laws and usages and established the government of cities by kings and magistrates brought human life into a state of great security and peace and delivered it from turmoil (θορύβων). But if anyone takes all this away, we shall live a life of brutes (θηρίον βίον) ...

In this light, it would testify to a naïve optimism if one would uphold the maxim “ὁ μηδὲν ἀδικῶν οὐδενὸς δεῖται νόμου”. Still, Plutarch would be inclined to go with the motto to a certain extent, and not simply because he dislikes the Epicureans. In his opinion, even if there were no laws, we would still have philosophy to guide us on the road to virtue: “we would do freely at the bidding of our reason, as Xenocrates says, what we do now at the command of the law”. Besides, “the very legislation that Colotes praises provides first and foremost for our belief in the gods” (1125). Philosophy and religion, then, are foundational for society. In *To the uneducated ruler* 5, just like the young philosopher in *Progress in Virtue* §10 is compared to the one who is initiated