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**A Summary and evaluation of Plato's Laws Book 10 and its overall purpose within the  
Laws.**

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Constructing an irrefutable argument for the existence of the gods is paramount to Book X of Plato's *Laws* and contributes to the overall purpose of the *Laws*. The work is a twelve book long dialogue which predominantly implies that philosophers should be granted credit for establishing the laws of a State. This is achieved by means of developing a constitution for the 'imagined polis' of Magnesia. The tenth book expands on this ideology and the cosmology set out at the end of book 7 by means of Athenian, Spartan and Cretan interlocutors and thereby delves into topics regarding divine revelation, divine law and law-giving<sup>1</sup>. Here, the Athenian states the rationale behind why it is critical for people to believe in the gods, as atheism or incorrect religious beliefs and practices are a "serious case of vice which can stem from intellectual error and moral corruption"<sup>2</sup>. Moreover without acknowledgement of the gods, abiding by the laws (which Plato states are divinely sanctioned), would become a matter of pure obligation and force, rather than a reasoned choice or a divine authorisation. Without a solid motive for abiding by state law, the foundation of the state would thus be rendered meaningless. As a result, it is the duty of the legislator to convert the unbeliever. In order to evaluate the proof of the gods' existence and to challenge the akratic cosmology, the argument is divided into three parts: 1. Against those who deny divine existence; 2. Against those who admit the existence of a God, but deny divine providence; 3. Against those who admit both the existence of a God and providence, but maintain that the deity could easily be propitiated or would not punish human sin severely<sup>3</sup>. In consequence, the *Laws* has the dual purpose of setting an exemplary cure for those who perceive law, religion and morality as human constructs, whilst also aiming to disavow all traces of philosophical origins in (real or perceived) atheism.

The primary focus of the *Laws* is to establish who should gain credit for state law. In Plato's opinion it should be philosophers. Throughout Book X, the Athenian holds the stance that laws are sanctioned by either a 'god' or a 'divine being'. As a result, he attacks the ideas prevalent among Pre-Socratic philosophers who claim that law, morality and religious beliefs are a product of *nomos* (laws and convention) and *phusis* (nature) and instead claims that their conclusions regarding the creation of the universe as a matter of nature and chance (*tuche*) as opposed to design (*techne*) and order are consequently acts of impiety<sup>4</sup>. The purpose of Book X within the entire work is thus to deal with laws against impiety and atheism, arguing that both are a form of intellectual error which may impair morality, affect the youth and cause "unrestrained hubristic acts of the young... [which] can affect what is public and sacred" (*Laws* 884a)<sup>5</sup>. Indeed elsewhere in the *Laws* atheism is further acknowledged as an issue to be tackled due to the implications it holds beyond the bounds of personal belief: it causes corruption of morality and influences the youth (as outlined in Book X), as well as the

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<sup>1</sup> Benardete, Seth. *Plato's "Laws": the discovery of being*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 288.

<sup>2</sup> Stalley, R.R. *An introduction to Plato's Laws*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, T. "Plato Against the Atheists: or the Tenth Book of the Dialogue on Laws." (1845), XII.

<sup>4</sup> Van Riel, Gerd. *Plato's gods*. (Routledge, 2016), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Van Riel, *Plato's gods*, 16.

material foundation of the state, in particular property, contracts and other institutions (introduced in Book XI)<sup>6</sup>. In contrast, the Athenian aims to demonstrate that genuine law is in fact a part of nature and thereby reconcile the *nomos-phusis* distinction<sup>7</sup>. For it is the view of the Athenian that the morally good goes hand in hand with the correct conception of the gods. As a consequence, without belief in the gods, abiding by the state laws and acting ethically would itself become a “matter of pure obligation and fore, rather than a reasoned choice”<sup>8</sup>, hence these matters should be promptly acted upon by the legislator. Book X thus stands not just as an exemplary ‘cure’ or ‘treatment’ for the condition of atheism as laid out in the Athenian’s set of irrefutable counter-beliefs which he lays down as an alternative to the akratic cosmology<sup>9</sup>, but it also demonstrates that the political philosopher holds the authority to interpret and guide divine law.

However, the *Laws* also has the purpose of trying to disavow all traces of philosophical origins (real or perceived) in atheism<sup>10</sup>. Since around 700 BCE, theological philosophers were often frowned upon for their questioning of the traditional Greek gods and the creation of the cosmos, which undercut Greek civic-religious practices. Pre-Socratic philosophers often directed their investigations towards the essential nature of the external world and the material principle (*arche*) of all things. They emphasised the rationality and order of the world and also showed interest in the structure and function of the human soul and the guidance of human knowledge and morality<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, it was likely in Plato’s mind that many of this philosophical predecessors had been accused of atheism and impiety. For example Protagoras had been expelled and had all of his works burned for his treatise ‘*On the Gods*’, which began “concerning the gods, I have no way of knowing whether they exist, or do not exist”<sup>12</sup> (DK 80 B4). The poet Diagoras was also supposedly condemned as an atheist and Anaxagoras was likewise said to have been exiled<sup>13</sup>. Yet perhaps the most famous target of intellectual censorship was Socrates, of whom Plato was a student and later apologist<sup>14</sup>. In 399 BCE Socrates was put to death by the state on the charge of “committing crimes in not recognising the state gods”<sup>15</sup>, and introducing new divinities instead<sup>16</sup>. In doing so, he also committed the crime of “corrupting the youth”<sup>17</sup>. Effectively, it was deemed that Socrates had shunned state religion

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<sup>6</sup> Stalley, *An introduction to Plato’s Laws*, 167.

<sup>7</sup> Stalley, *An introduction to Plato’s Laws*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Van Riel, *Plato’s gods*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Brill, Sara. “A soul superlatively natural: psychic excess in *Laws* 10”, in Eric Sanday and Gregory Recco (eds.), *Plato’s Laws, force and truth in politics*. (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2012), 195.

<sup>10</sup> Whitmarsh, Tim. *Battling the gods: Atheism in the ancient world*. (Faber & Faber, 2016), 136 – 137.

<sup>11</sup> Seyffert, Oskar. *A dictionary of Classical Antiquities, Mythology, Religion, Literature and Art*. (W. Glaiser, 1895, 480).

<sup>12</sup> Protagoras. “On the gods”. Translated by Andre Laks and Glen.W.Most. Loeb Classical library.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson, Emily R. *The death of Socrates*. (Harvard University Press, 2007), 29.

<sup>14</sup> Whitmarsh, Tim. *Battling the gods: Atheism in the ancient world*, 126.

<sup>15</sup> Plato. “The Apology”. Translated by Fowler, Harold. (*Loeb Classical Library*), 24 – 27.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, Emily R. *The death of Socrates*, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Plato. “The Apology”. Translated by Fowler, Harold. (*Loeb Classical Library*), 24 – 27.

in favour of a private mysticism. This idea was rooted in his claims that he had access to an unidentified ‘*daimonion*’ (divine thing) which provided him with divine knowledge<sup>18</sup>. For the Greeks, this was an act of *asebeia* (impiety), which went directly against their usual ideology of religion<sup>19</sup>. However, Plato was by no means an atheist, and thus throughout the *Laws* he hesitates to talk about the gods in the appropriate way, understanding that only a truly correct account of the gods could be granted by the gods themselves and that theology is therefore a subject to be wary of<sup>20</sup>. The *Laws* consequently aims to distance Plato from the charges of impiety, as it does not directly challenge the existence of the gods, but rather re-evaluates the understanding of the divine, “transforming archaic theogony (against which the atheist reacts in formulating his cosmology) into a noetic theology (which does not need to operate independently of a noetic cosmology)”<sup>21</sup>.

The first argument for the proof of the gods is against those who deny all divine existence. This is introduced by a declaration from the Cretan ‘Cleinias’ that in order to get atheists to abide by divinely sanctioned state laws, it is fundamental to be able to prove the existence of the gods. The Athenian’s aim is thus not to force heretics into practicing religion, but rather persuade them that the gods do in fact exist<sup>22</sup>. This argument commences with Cleinias’ reference to the orderly structure of the universe, mathematical sequencing of the seasons, years and months and the fact that “all Greeks and barbarians are unanimous in recognising the existence of the gods” (*Laws X*, 886a)<sup>23</sup>. However, the Athenian remarks that this teleological argument alone will not do in confronting a reflective atheist, as the denial of divine existence stems from a kind of ignorance, meaning that they cannot see or simply are not interested in knowing the truth<sup>24</sup>. The Athenian argues that the atheist does not comprehend the divine as they misconstrue the nature of the soul: “what it is, the power it has, and particularly... its generation- that it is the first among all things, coming into being before all bodies and that it more than anything governs their changes and all of their transformations” (*Laws X*, 891e). In addition, an atheist also ignorantly believes that the cosmos was created “not through reason ... nor through some god nor through art, but ... by nature and chance” (*Laws X*, 889c). Thus, as a product of human invention, they conclude

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<sup>18</sup> Wilson, Emily R. *The death of Socrates*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Whitmarsh, Tim. *Battling the gods: Atheism in the ancient world*, 126.

<sup>20</sup> Van Riel, *Plato’s gods*, 33.

<sup>21</sup> Brill, Sara. “A soul superlatively natural: psychic excess in *Laws 10*”, 190.

<sup>22</sup> Tate, J. “Greek for ‘Atheism’.” *The Classical Review* 50, no. 1 (1936): 4.

<sup>23</sup> Van Riel, *Plato’s gods*, 43.

<sup>24</sup> Dombrowski, Daniel A. *A Platonic Philosophy of Religion: A Process Perspective*. (SUNY Press, 2012), 85.

that gods can have no real existence<sup>25</sup>. Moreover the Athenian argues that atheists are persuaded by sophists who align law with *techne* against nature, and who, on the basis of this antagonism, chart out a politics that validates injustice under the rubric of living a natural life. In response to this akratic cosmology and the politics it suggests, the Athenian accepts the vision of *phusis* that the atheists submit as the ‘production of all things primary; however he states there is an error in what atheists consider ‘primary things’ to be. The Athenian asserts that it is the soul (*psuche*) which is responsible for the first productions and thus it is the soul which should be considered the most natural of things. He then expands on this by stating that the very essence of soul is self-movement and that the condition of things being able to move themselves is that of being ‘alive’ and that presence of soul is also associated in the condition of something being considered ‘alive’<sup>26</sup>. Armed with the definition of soul holding “self-movement”, he states that if the soul is the cause (*pragmata*) of all things, becoming, that have become and will become as well as the source of movement and change, it must be the oldest of all things generated (therefore coming before body) and it causes all opposites and controls the heavens<sup>27</sup>. The interlocutors consequently agree that there must be two forms of soul- that which is good (in conjunction to the mind), and that which is bad (with relation to madness and folly). In an attempt to conclude which one controls the heavens, they investigate which motion is proper to the mind. On the grounds that revolution is the most indicative of the motion of the mind and the heavens, they conclude that it is a good soul (or rather several good souls) which must govern the heavens<sup>28</sup>:

“So, as the source of all motions, and the first to come to be among what was standing still and to exist among what moves, we shall assert that the one that moves itself (*psyche*) is necessarily the oldest and most powerful change of all, while the one that is altered by another and moves others is second” (*Laws X*, 895b).

This concept is stressed with the image of the Sun, which stands as a representation of the cosmos as a whole, and which is moved by a ‘good soul’. The Athenian consequently resolves that because the Sun and other heavenly bodies cannot be soulless and that the cosmos, like the sun, is therefore moved by a soul which must be a god. Accordingly, the

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<sup>25</sup> Dombrowski. *A Platonic Philosophy of Religion: A Process Perspective*, 85.

<sup>26</sup> Brill, Sara. “A soul superlatively natural: psychic excess in *Laws 10*”, 196.

<sup>27</sup> Mayhew, Robert. ‘The Theology of the Laws’, in Christopher Bobonich (ed.), *Plato’s Laws: a Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 205.

<sup>28</sup> Brill, Sara. “A soul superlatively natural: psychic excess in *Laws 10*”, 196 and Mayhew, Robert. “*The Theology of the Laws*”, 205.

interlocutors solidly lay down the conditions which an atheist must refute: either the atheist must prove that the soul is neither a self-mover nor is older than body, or he must acknowledge and honour the gods<sup>29</sup>.

The argument then progresses into its second stage, against those who believe in god, but do not acknowledge that he cares for mortals. This argument is approached rather differently to that against atheism. This is because whilst the atheist is believed to have fallen victim to a view handed to him by certain sophists, the individual who views the gods as neglectful is believed to be a victim of “his own observations and the many stories told and songs sung that valorise an unjust life”<sup>30</sup>. In his argument against deism (the philosophical position that a god does not interact with the mortal world directly), the Athenian claims that the gods possess the traits of reason, courage and moderation<sup>31</sup> and as “the gods perceive, see and hear all, nothing within the compass of sense or knowledge can fall outside their cognisance” (*Laws* 901d). As a result, they are the best of beings and are unable to neglect any matters, no matter how small they are: “it is a sheer impossibility that there should be any indolence or petulance in their conduct” (*Laws* 902a). The Athenian supports this refutation of Deism, stating that the universe was put together with the view of perfection, and the “safety and virtue of the whole by the one who supervises the universe” is therefore assured (*Laws* 903b). In respect to the universe being a model of perfection, the gods therefore treat humans as their ‘property’ and the tropes of ownership and kinship come into play. As a consequence the Athenian sums up that as the gods are the epitome of perfection, humans “should be assured of the care and attention of the gods who, in their solicitude of what is their own, are exemplars of ownership”<sup>32</sup>.

The third and final argument proposed by the Athenian is against those who believe in the gods, but deem that they can be influenced by means of prayer or sacrifice. Here the Athenian claims that if the gods are to hold effective control over the cosmos, they must be a sort of ‘governor’ or ‘ruler’: “presumably the gods will be like governors, if they are to manage the whole universe effectively” (*Laws* 905e). In addition, because the world is full of “good things, but by no less full of their contraries” (*Laws* 906), mortals are constantly under the watchful eye of the gods and we are in effect the “property of these gods and spirits”

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<sup>29</sup> Brill, Sara. “A soul superlatively natural: psychic excess in *Laws* 10”, 197.

<sup>30</sup> Brill, Sara. “A soul superlatively natural: psychic excess in *Laws* 10”, 197.

<sup>31</sup> Mayhew, Robert. “*The Theology of the Laws*”, 207.

<sup>32</sup> Brill, Sara. “A soul superlatively natural: psychic excess in *Laws* 10”, 198.

(*Laws* 906). Thus if the gods were to be swayed by bribery they should not be good rulers<sup>33</sup>. Yet this cannot be the case, for the interlocutors have already deduced that the gods are good- they possess virtue, moderation, prudence and justice (*Laws* 906a – d) and are the “greatest of all guardians and over all the greatest things” (*Laws* 907a). Consequently, to suppose that the gods can be bribed, would be regarding them as inferior to human governors and is absurd<sup>34</sup>.

So we can finally evaluate the views Plato holds on the gods. Through the means of the Athenian as interlocutor we can determine that Plato believes that the gods exist and are good. They have a good *psuche* and therefore stand as the epitome of virtue, reason, moderation and justice<sup>35</sup>. Thus, as the standard mortals should hold of virtue and as the source of celestial order, the gods are consequently perceived as the measure of all things. In addition, the greatest god is the “pure reason that is responsible for and orders and moves the entirety of the cosmos, integrating and directing the movement of all other gods”<sup>36</sup>. As a result Plato sees that there is a connection between the gods and reason: “for to be ruled by a god is to be ruled by reason”<sup>37</sup>. Despite these beliefs, the overall theology examined in the *Laws* is inexplicit and poorly described. Mayhew claims that there are two reasons for this: 1. Because philosophical theology is difficult, and 2. Because in the historical context, it was potentially dangerous to challenge traditional belief systems<sup>38</sup>. In the context of the creation of Magnesia and its laws as a ‘second-best’ state, the Athenian believes that all that is required to ensure proper law abiding conduct and ethical character from the citizens is irrefutable proof that the gods exist and that they are good and care for humans. However, aiming to explain this theology to individuals with no background in philosophy is not at all easy (as seen in the river fording analogy). In addition, as most Greeks would have accepted and believed the stories of the gods that they were raised on (implied 887c – e), to challenge these beliefs or propose alternatives would in fact “undercut proper civic-religious beliefs by casting doubt upon them or shrouding them in obscurity”<sup>39</sup>. This is why the interlocutors are vague in their examination of ‘the greatest god’ and hesitant in speaking of the gods and the overall cause and reason behind the creation of the cosmos- because not only would this be

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<sup>33</sup> Mayhew, Robert. “*The Theology of the Laws*”, 208.

<sup>34</sup> Stalley, *An introduction to Plato’s Laws*, 196.

<sup>35</sup> Mayhew, Robert. “*The Theology of the Laws*”, 211.

<sup>36</sup> Mayhew, Robert. “*The Theology of the Laws*”, 213..

<sup>37</sup> Mayhew, Robert. “*The Theology of the Laws*”, 213.

<sup>38</sup> Mayhew, Robert. “*The Theology of the Laws*”, 214.

<sup>39</sup> Mayhew, Robert. “*The Theology of the Laws*”, 215.

impious and difficult to convey<sup>40</sup>, but it is a challenging subject (even for philosophers) in its own respects<sup>41</sup>.

In conclusion, Book X sets out the arguments behind Plato's beliefs existence of the gods. This is done through the dialogue of interlocutors with the purpose of challenging atheist beliefs, supporting state laws (by reasoning that they are both divinely issued and sanctioned) and to deny a relationship between philosophy and atheism. The purpose of *Book X* within the greater context of the work is to state that philosophers deserve credit for the creation of state laws and to challenge atheist views. In Plato's belief law is divinely sanctioned. He claims that the gods exist; they are moral, just and virtuous and thus cannot neglect any human nor be persuaded or bribed by means of sacrifice or prayer.

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<sup>40</sup> Van Riel, *Plato's gods*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Mayhew, Robert. "*The Theology of the Laws*", 215.



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