

The Politics of Vergil's Cosmogony: Cosmos, Chaos, and Taxis

“ἔις τάξιιν αὐτὸ ἤγαγεν ἐκ τῆς ἀταξίας”
–Plato, *Timaeus* [30A]¹

The politics of Vergil's *Aeneid* and the nature of its relationship to Augustan Rome have been the subject of much debate among scholars in recent years. The back and forth between the pro-Augustan and anti-Augustan readings of the *Aeneid* occupies a sizable portion of the scholarship on the subject.² While more nuanced readings of the text are possible, scholars who read the *Aeneid* in such a way feel the strong need to defend the nuanced positions against the backdrop of the traditional debate. Ernst Schmidt, for instance, argues for the possibility of the “epic objectivity” or “impartiality” of the *Aeneid* in respect to the conflict between the “pessimistic Harvard School” and the “traditional German approach.”³ Likewise, Deborah Beck's recent article circumvents the traditional debate, proposing that Vergil relies on larger thematic material that ties Romans to Augustan sentiment without the text being either clearly or definitely pro-Augustan.⁴ The current debate,

¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, in *Plato: Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, translated by R. G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929).

² For a full discussion of the debate between the competing schools and an attempt to synthesize them, see Ernst A. Schmidt, “The Meaning of Vergil's *Aeneid*: American and German Approaches.” *Classical World* 94, no. 2 (2001): 145-71.

³ *Ibid.*, 169 & 146.

⁴ Deborah Beck, “The First Simile of the *Aeneid*,” *Vergilius* 60 (2014): 78-9.

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however, has ignored a significant philosophical element, which supersedes strictly political pro- or anti-Augustan readings of the text. Behind the political imagery, Vergil radically overturns a traditionally Greek understanding of *cosmos* by suggesting that Roman authority has the power to stabilize the universe. To understand its philosophical import, we will look primarily to the *Aeneid* 1.124-56, which is, in turn, interpreted in light of imperial imagery in Jupiter's prophecy to Venus (1.286-91). As will be seen, the peculiarity of Vergil's view of *cosmos* has a substantial bearing on both the *Aeneid* and the Romans' philosophical conception of themselves. Moreover, the tension between made order (*taxis*) and universal order (*cosmos*) continues to affect the philosophical discussion of political authority.

The idea of *cosmos* implicit in the first book of the *Aeneid* is first indicated by the appearance of its opposite, the disorderly disarray of matter, which continually threatens a return to preeminence. In the dispute between Neptune and Aeolus over the right to control the wind, Neptune states, "could you have so much trust in your family connections, you mere winds, / that, without my consent, you dare make earth and the heavens / Chaos again and create so monstrous a mass of confusion?" (1.132-34).⁵ Vergil contrasts this threat of Chaos' return with the "still, calm depths" of Neptune's ocean (1.126). Here we see the careful juxtaposition of order and Chaos, with the latter as a threatening force of destruction. While the idea of Chaos as an active force of disorder is an important development and already represents a departure from Hesiod's

⁵ English quotations of the *Aeneid*, unless otherwise noted, come from Frederick Ahl, *The Aeneid* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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Theogony, we nonetheless see Vergil's importation of *cosmos* and *chaos* from the Greek into his text.⁶

In the Latin text, Vergil makes this allusion to *chaos* without using the Greek noun *chaos* per se, but instead by Latinizing the concept. As in the above, Neptune speaks:

*iam caelum terramque meo sine numine, venti,
miscere et tantas audetis tollere moles?*

*Without my power, winds, do you dare mix
heaven and earth and raise up again the great
shapeless masses? (1.133-34)*⁷

By his word choice (*miscere, tantas moles*), Vergil clearly intends to take the reader into the realm of Greek *chaos*. Seizing on this same lexical connection, Ovid renders *chaos* in the same way in the *Metamorphoses*. Defining *chaos*, he writes:

*Ante mare et terras et quod tegit omnia caelum
unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe, quem
dixere chaos: rudis indigestaque moles
[emphasis added] ...*

*Before the sea was, and the lands, and the sky
That hangs over all, the face of Nature showed
alike in her whole round, which state have men
called chaos: a rough, unordered mass of things
... (Ovid, Metamorphoses, 1.5-7)*⁸

The lexical connection having been established between the Latin word *moles* and Greek idea of chaos as disorder, we may

⁶ "the Chasm: this is the literal meaning of the Greek name *Chaos*; it does not contain the idea of confusion or disorder." M. L. West, "Notes" in *Theogony; Works and Days* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 64.

⁷ My translation. I have tried to render the Latin more literally in order to emphasize the *tantas moles* and their connection to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Latin quotations from the *Aeneid* are taken from Virgil, *The Aeneid*, translated by H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

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rightly infer the proper existence of *cosmos* (universal order) and continue in our examination of impact on the text.

The Greek idea of *cosmos*, or universal order, as discussed here has variety of nuances in meaning, ranging from order and seemliness in their plainest senses to body politic.⁹ For the present, we will only gloss the definition and a few of the attributes of *cosmos* as discussed by Plato and Aristotle. In *On the cosmos*, Aristotle defines it as follows: “*Cosmos*, then, means a system composed of heaven and earth and the elements contained in them. In another sense, *cosmos* is used to signify the orderly arrangement of the universe [ἡ τῶν ὄλων τάξις τε καὶ διακόσμησις], which is preserved by God and through God.”¹⁰ This “orderly arrangement,” however, is composed of many opposite things that would be discordant and unseemly if they were out of balance.¹¹ But the proportionality and balance of all the elements creates beauty, harmony, and order: “And everything that is beautiful takes its name from this, and all that is well-arranged; for it is called ‘well-ordered’ (κεκοσμηθῆναι) after this ‘universal order’ (κόσμος).”¹²

Likewise, Plato espouses a view of the *cosmos* in the *Timaeus*, which speaks of a divine being creating universal order in a way that is both seemly and “is apprehensible by reason and thought” [29A].¹³ For Plato, the cosmos being ordered in this way is not only good, it is also moral. This point becomes evident as we examine his cosmogony. For “God used all the

⁹ Jaan Puhvel, “The Origins of Greek Kosmos and Latin Mundus,” *American Journal of Philology* 97, no. 2 (1976): 154-57.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *On the cosmos*, translated by E. S. Foster (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 347 [391b.9-12].

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 377.

¹² *Ibid.*, 381.

¹³ Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. by R.G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), 53.

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elements in making the world, and therefore it is perfect, and not liable to old age or disease. It is harmonized by proportion, which cause it to have the spirit of friendship, and therefore to be indissoluble except by God.”¹⁴ As Plato demonstrates, it is God’s intention to create goodness through the imposition of order (*cosmos*): “For God desired that, so far as possible, all things should be good and nothing evil; wherefore, when He took over all that was visible, seeing that it was not in a state of rest but in a state of discordant and disorderly motion, He brought it into order out of disorder [εἰς τὰξιν αὐτὸ ἤγαγεν ἐκ τῆς ἀταξίας].”¹⁵ For our purposes, it is this last point that will be most essential. Bertrand Russell states this quite succinctly: “[T]he account of the creation as bringing order out of chaos is to be taken quite seriously ... [and the] whole dialogue ... deserves to be studied because of its great influence on ancient and medieval thought.”¹⁶ No less because these views of cosmos became contemporaneous with Vergil. As we see from Cicero’s translation of a large portion of Plato’s *Timaeus*, the Greek concept of *cosmos* had fully penetrated the Roman imagination, so much so that the Romans began re-appropriating it for their own artistic and philosophical purposes.¹⁷

¹⁴ Bertrand Russell, “Plato’s Cosmogony,” in *A History of Western Philosophy, And Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 144.

¹⁵ Plato, *Timaeus*, [30A] 53.

¹⁶ Bertrand Russell, “Plato’s Cosmogony,” 148.

¹⁷ For a discussion of Cicero’s translation and the subtle differences with his translation and Plato’s dialogue, see David Sedley, “Cicero and the *Timaeus*,” in *Aristotle, Plato and Pythagoreanism in the First Century BC*, edited by Malcolm Schofield (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 197-205.

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In the *Aeneid* 1.124-56, we first encounter the concepts of *cosmos* and *chaos*, which Vergil clearly uses as a metaphor for Roman political conflict. After the aforementioned passage in which Neptune rebukes Aeolus' winds, Vergil goes on to equate the conflict between the gods with political turmoil. He writes,

*Much the same happens within a great nation,
here lawlessness often bursts into riots, where
people become mobs savage with passion:
Firebrands, stones, start flying through air (fury
furnishes weapons). Then, if they happen to
glimpse a man worth their respect for his
righteous Conduct, they're silenced. They prick
up their ears and await his instructions. He, with
his words, brings passions to heel, lulls panting
to calmness (1.148-53).*

On first glance, this passage is significant for two reasons: a) it makes the assertion that a great man has the power to quell the chaos of the masses; b) it places mankind at the center of the cosmos by comparing the gods to man instead of vice versa. As we will see, neither of these choices is arbitrary, and together they create the radical philosophical thrust of Vergil's epic.

To the first, it may not seem entirely radical to compare the order and disorder of politics to that of cosmos and chaos, such as we saw expounded on by Plato and Aristotle. Vergil, however, extends the authority of man to include the domain that should be that of the gods, or beyond the gods, the ordered universe. Referring to the simile quoted in part above in 1.148-56, Deborah Beck reminds us of the force Vergil's poetic reversal: "At a more general level, [the] simile inverts a fundamental feature of Homeric similes in that it illustrates a natural phenomenon by comparing it to a human one rather

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than the reverse."¹⁸ Older commentators on Vergil go even further: "This simile, one of the most original in Virgil, is an illustration of Nature from man, the reverse being generally the case in Virgil and Homer ... Virgil probably had in his mind the stormy scenes of the recent civil wars."¹⁹ Yet the importance of the simile goes far beyond politics and dives straight into an increasingly complicated cosmology.

The sizable philosophical expansion of mankind's place in the universe goes even further than the backwards metaphor. For example, Vergil says of Aeneas' descendants: "From them Roman commanders were sure, some day in the future's / Rolling years, to arise ... Men who would hold all lands, all seas, under their jurisdiction" (1.233-36). While on first glance it may seem that Vergil is innocuously making reference to military superiority of the Romans both on land and sea, even so, the Romans are stepping into god-like authority: for clearly lands should be subject to the gods of war and the sea to Neptune. In Jupiter's prophecy, Vergil takes the idea even further:

I am imposing no bounds on his realm, no temporal limits, Empire that has no end is my gift ... There will be born of this splendid lineage a Caesar, a Trojan. He'll make Ocean the bounds of his power, and the stars of his glory, He will be Julius — a name that derives from the mighty Iulus. One day, anxiety gone, you'll take him up to the heavens Loaded with spoils from the East. He too will be called on in prayer. Then all wars will cease (1.278-79, 1.286-91).

¹⁸ Beck, "The First Simile of the *Aeneid*," 71.

¹⁹ Virgil. *Aeneid* / Virgil edited with introduction and notes. Edited by A. E. Haigh and T. L. Papillon, Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890-92. Deborah Beck also refers to this source with a footnote at Beck, "The First Simile of the *Aeneid*," 71.

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Not only is the Roman dynasty an actor in its own political realm; it exhibits a stabilizing force on the whole cosmos. The kingdom of Julius is boundless, not only in a terrestrial sense, but also insofar as it has no temporal limits, spanning both the stars and the oceans. By putting a man first in comparing him to nature, he supersedes even the influence of the gods, acting on his own to restore balance to the cosmos. Without his stabilizing force, the universe returns to “so monstrous a mass of confusion” (1.133-34).

The comparison of political turmoil and chaos, however, is not what gives Vergil’s politics its force. Even Aristotle makes such a comparison in his discussion of *cosmos*: “Now we must suppose that the majesty of the Great King falls short of the majesty of the god who rules the cosmos by as much as the difference between the King and the poorest and weakest creature in the world[.]”²⁰ The difference between the two views is clear: Aristotle sees the place of the king as a prominent actor in his proper realm. On the other hand, Vergil claims that Roman political institutions have boundless jurisdiction and the capacity to affect the whole universal order. This is not only shocking; it’s blasphemous.²¹

In the chapter entitled “Cosmos and Taxis,” the philosopher and economist F. A. Hayek provides an useful distinction between two distinct forms of order: “Classical Greek was more fortunate in possessing distinct single words for the two kinds of order, namely *taxis* for a made order, such as, for

²⁰ Aristotle, *On the cosmos*, 347 [391b.9-12].

²¹ It is worth noting that the force of such a cosmic reversal appears in Seneca’s *Thyestes*. The chorus [789-884] seems to be concerned that the solar eclipse is caused by the actions of Thyestes. See *Thyestes*; see also K. Volk’s discussion of the implications of this reversal (2006).

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example, an order of battle, and *kosmos* for a grown order, meaning originally 'a right order in a state or a community.'"²² For Hayek, there is a fundamental distinction between an order created by natural phenomena and one created by will. By imposing the will of Roman institutions on the cosmos, Vergil is conflating these two kinds of order. Not only does Rome's place as the center of the cosmos fundamentally disrupt the concept of universal order as espoused by Plato and Aristotle; it is also impossible to restore a principle of universal order (*cosmos*) through an act of political will (*taxis*).

What, then, is the philosophical impact of Vergil's inversion of *cosmos*? First, insofar as it concerns Augustan political legitimacy, this inversion increases Augustus' *auctoritas*, expanding his legitimacy throughout the bounds of the cosmos.²³ Sabine Grebe has already demonstrated that Vergil's *Aeneid* helps give Augustus authority granted by the gods. As she puts it, "[the] *Aeneid* reinforces the idea Augustus, as the *telos* of Roman history and as the ultimate head of the secular authority, signifies the gods' will."²⁴ Furthermore, "Virgil elevates Roman history and Augustus to the divine level."²⁵ As we have seen, however, Vergil goes one step further, claiming for Augustus the ability to restore order in the cosmos in an attempt to give his *taxis* the authority of the *cosmos*.

To interpret the *Aeneid* and the politics of Vergil in light of 1.124-56 is not at all uncommon, and a variety of views have

²² F. A. Hayek, "Cosmos and Taxis," in *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 37.

²³ For a discussion of Augustan *auctoritas*, see S. Grebe, "Augustus' Divine Authority and Vergil's *Aeneid*," *Vergilius* 50 (2004): 35-62.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 46.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 47.

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been proposed in light of it.²⁶ However, the philosophical impact of cosmos' inversion in the text has been largely neglected, and its impact must not be underestimated. Moreover, there are several consequences that come about as a result of this reversal. First, the authority of Augustus and the Roman state extends beyond the terrestrial and has the power to affect the cosmos. Second, the placement of Rome at the philosophical center of the universe would create an extraordinary sense of self-importance among the Romans. Within the *Aeneid* itself, the tension between man's will (*taxis*), cosmos, and chaos grants Aeneas' journey a significance that supersedes both the political and the epic elements of the text, and which ultimately carries the hero into the cosmic.

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²⁶ See Beck, "The First Simile," 74; Grebe, "Augustus' Divine Authority," 45.

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