

# Plato's *Epinomis*

**Persons of the dialogue:** Cleinias, Athenian

**Cle:** <sup>973A</sup> Well stranger, here we are, duly assembled, all three of us as we agreed, you and me and Megillus here to consider what account we should give of the sort of understanding which, according to us, once apprehended, gives a person the finest understanding a human being can possibly have. For although we maintain that we have, in general, <sup>973B</sup> described all matters concerned with lawgiving we have neither investigated nor referred to the most important question: what exactly should a mere mortal learn in order to become wise? So we should now attempt to make good this omission. Indeed, we run the risk of failing to complete the objective of all our endeavours which was to clarify everything from beginning to end.

**Ath:** Well said Cleinias. I believe the argument you're about to hear is unusual and also, in a sense not so strange at all. <sup>973C</sup> Indeed many people, based upon their experience of life, proffer the same argument; that the human race will never be blessed or happy. Follow me then and decide whether or not you think I am right in what I say, along with them, about such a matter. I deny the possibility of humanity, with few exceptions, being blessed and happy at least during this lifetime. But on dying there is a noble hope of encountering everything that we are so eager for as we live the very best life we can whilst alive and aim for the noblest departure when we die. <sup>973D</sup> I am not saying anything wise, but something that all Greeks and non-Greeks would somehow recognise, that from the very outset, being born is a difficulty. First there is involvement in the condition of all who dwell in the womb, then there is the actual birth, followed by nurture and education, and everyone agrees that all of these <sup>974A</sup> involve a great deal of trouble. And indeed if we don't count the travails but only what people would regard as acceptable, the duration would be quite short providing a sort of breathing space, it seems, in the middle phase of human life. Yet old age sets in quickly making anyone who is not full of naïve notions reluctant to live life all over again, having reflected upon the life that has just been lived. So, what evidence do I have for all this? This is the nature of the subject of our current investigation. <sup>974B</sup> We are investigating the manner in which we may become wise on the assumption that each of us has this capacity in some measure. But it takes flight and is gone once someone embarks upon any understanding of the so-called skills or the other areas of understanding or branches of knowledge, as none of these deserve the title of wisdom concerning these human affairs. But our soul is strongly convinced and intuits that it somehow possesses this wisdom, by nature, <sup>974C</sup> although it is quite unable to find out when and how, or even to discover what it is. Now doesn't the problem with our enquiry into wisdom bear a strong resemblance to this. It is enquiry that exceeds the expectations of those among us who are capable of examining ourselves and others intelligently and coherently through all sorts of arguments and various discussions. Shall we agree that this is how matters stand or not?

**Cle:** We shall agree stranger, based perhaps on the hope that, in your company, <sup>974D</sup> in due course, the truest possible opinion on these matters may eventually arise.

**Ath:** Well we must first review the other kinds of knowledge, so-called, whose acquisition does not render the possessor wise. This will enable us to set these aside and attempt to introduce those we need, and to understand them too once they have been introduced. Well, in the first place, of those which constitute the primary needs of the mortal race we should note that, although these branches of knowledge are <sup>974A</sup> more or less the most necessary of all, and truly primary, their possessor, even if he did it once seem wise initially, is certainly not regarded as wise nowadays, rather, he incurs reproach <sup>975A</sup> on account of having this sort of knowledge. Let's say what these are then, and state that every man, those at least to strive for inclusion among those with the very best reputation, flee from these so that they may acquire understanding and its practical application. Let the first one be our knowledge of eating other creatures, which, the story goes, forbids this entirely in some cases and institutes a law to allow such consumption in other cases. May those who have gone before us be gracious to us as indeed they are but let us first bid farewell to those <sup>975B</sup> we have just mentioned for although the production of barley and wheat as well as food is noble and good it will never, of itself, make someone perfectly wise. Indeed the very word "production" might bring about a distaste for the actual things that are produced. And since it is not by our skill, it seems, but by nature subject to God, that we have all come to manage the earth, agriculture will never really make us wise either. Nor indeed will the building of houses, or construction in general, the manufacture <sup>975C</sup> of various sorts of equipment, the work of the blacksmith, the carpenter, the potter, the weaver, and the provision of all sorts of tools. This knowledge is of benefit to the populace but it is not said to confer excellence. Nor again does hunting in all its forms, multifarious and skilled as it has become, ever elevate the soul or confer wisdom neither does prophecy or its interpretation do so at all, for the prophet merely knows what he is saying without understanding whether it is true or not.

Now we can see that the acquisition of our necessities is achieved <sup>975D</sup> by means of skill, but that none of the skills makes a person wise, what is left after this is play. which is, for the most part, imitative, but by no means serious. For although they are engaging in imitation by various devices and by numerous imitations of the body itself that are most unseemly, and by means of words and music in general, and the arts that are born of painting, achieving a great variety of designs of all sorts in various mediums, wet and dry, imitation does not make anyone wise in any respect, even someone who toils with the utmost diligence.

<sup>975E</sup> When these have all been excluded what remains is defence of vast numbers of people by countless means, the most important and extensive being called military skill, the skill of the general, requiring a lot of good fortune but, by nature, given more to courage than to wisdom. <sup>976A</sup> As for the skill of the physician this is presumably a defence of sorts against the ravages inflicted upon the nature of living creatures by the various seasons with their untimely cold and heat and the like. But none of this is reputed to be wisdom in the truest sense, being devoid of measure and driven by opinion and guesswork. We also refer to steersmen and sailors to as defenders, but you would not declare a single man among them to be wise, even to reassure us. For they could not know the wrath of the wind nor its friendly

face either <sup>976B</sup>, all of which is so central to navigation. Nor indeed do those who claim to act as our defenders in lawsuits with their power of speech. They pay attention to human character by means of memory and experience born of opinion, but they have strayed afar from the truth of what is really just.

But there remains yet an unusual power that is reputed to be wisdom although most people would call it a natural capacity rather than wisdom. It is noticed in a person who easily learns whatever he is learning, <sup>976C</sup> securely commits a lot of material to memory, recalls what is relevant to each situation and what is appropriate, and quickly enacts this. All this is designated by some as a natural capacity, by others as wisdom, by others as a natural shrewdness, but no sensible person will ever be prepared to call someone truly wise for any of these endowments.

But surely there must prove to be some knowledge whose possession would constitute the wisdom of the one who is truly wise and does not merely seem so. Let's see. For we are attempting <sup>976D</sup> to find, through an extremely difficult argument, another knowledge besides those we have mentioned, a knowledge which may truly and reasonably be described as wisdom, which will render its possessor neither lowly nor simple minded, by which he will be a wise and good denizen of the city, ruling and being ruled justly, as a fitting citizen. So let's first look for the one knowledge, among all those we have at present, which would render the human race mindless and stupid if it was removed from human nature, or was never present at all. There is not much difficulty in seeing what this is. <sup>976E</sup> For comparing one with another, so to speak, the knowledge which gives number to the entire mortal race would do this. And it is a god I believe rather than good fortune that saves us by giving this to us.

But I believe I should state which god since it is an unusual one and somehow, again, not unusual. For how could we ever doubt that the cause of everything that is good <sup>977A</sup> for us is also the cause of the greatest good of all, namely understanding? So, Megillus and Cleinias what god am I referring to with such seriousness? Surely it is Ouranos whom we are duty bound to honor along with all the other gods and to whom above all we should pray. We would all agree that he has been the cause of everything else that is good for us and we also maintain, correctly, that he has, at the same time, also given us number and continues to give this to anyone <sup>977B</sup> who is willing to follow along. For once someone embarks upon the correct contemplation of this god, either as the cosmos, as Olympus, or as the heaven, or whatever one pleases to call it, let him only follow how this provides the seasons and sustenance to all as it variegates itself and turns all the courses of the stars within itself. And so we would maintain that along with all number and the other goods there is also understanding in general. But if someone having accepted his gift of numbers were to explore the entire circuit of the heaven, this would be the supreme benefit.

Yet, going back a little in the argument, we should recall <sup>977C</sup> how right we were to appreciate that if number was indeed removed from human nature we would never attain any understanding. For the soul of that creature from whom rational discourse is absent could never yet attain total excellence. And a creature that could recognize neither two nor three, odd nor even, and was ignorant of number in general, would never be able to give a rational

account of anything of which it had acquired mere sense impressions and memories. There is however nothing to prevent it from acquiring the rest <sup>977D</sup> of excellence, courage, and soundmindedness. But being deprived of true discourse no one could ever become wise, and whoever is devoid of wisdom, the greatest part of excellence as a whole, could never become happy because he would not have become perfectly good. And so it is absolutely necessary that number be the foundation, but to explain why this must be so would give rise to an argument more extensive than anything we have yet discussed. But it will indeed be correct to declare now that whatever is said about the other skills which we listed just now, accepting that there are these various skills, <sup>977E</sup> not a single one of these remains, but all of them cease entirely, once someone does away with the skill of number.

Someone, having considered the various skills might perhaps assume that the human race needs number for everyday purposes, although even this is important. But what if someone were to behold both the divine and the mortal aspects of creation, in which reverence and true <sup>978A</sup> number will be discovered? Yet not everyone would recognise just how much power number, in its totality, is responsible for, when it assists us. Indeed music in all its aspects obviously requires the enumeration of movement and sounds. Nor will many realise, most importantly, that number is responsible for all that is good and, as we need to understand, for none of the evils that may perchance befall us. And anyone who is to conclude his life in happiness needs to appreciate that any, more or less, irrational, disordered, unseemly, unrhythmical, and inharmonious motion, and anything else that involves <sup>978B</sup> anything bad, is lacking in all number. And no one who does not have knowledge of the just, the beautiful, and everything of that sort, having acquired only true opinion about them, will ever enumerate them in such a way that he fully convinces himself or anyone else.

Let us proceed then with our enquiry into this very question: how did we learn to use number? Come on then, from where did the one and the two come to us, so that <sup>978C</sup> we may think of them, possessing, from the universe, this nature that enables us to think thus. Now in many other creatures the nature enabling them to do this is not even present, and so they are unable to learn how to use number even from the Father. But the god first implanted this particular ability in us so that we would be up to the task of understanding what is being shown, and he then showed us, and continues to do so. Of all that is shown to us what one could be a more beautiful one than the realm of day? We may then come to the night time retaining our vision, where something totally different would be presented to us. <sup>978D</sup> And as the heaven keeps on revolving these very objects around, through many nights and many days, it keeps on teaching one and two to us humans until even the slowest learner has adequately learned how to use number. And indeed, on seeing these, each of us would also conceive of three and four and many. And as he was fashioning the various objects the god made one of them, the moon, which appears large at one time, smaller at another, as it proceeds on its way, always illuminating a different <sup>978E</sup> day until fifteen days and nights have elapsed. This is its actual orbit if you are prepared to treat a single cycle as one, so that even a creature who is very slow to learn would learn this, provided the god had bestowed a nature that is capable of learning. And thus far and in these respects every capable creature has become skilled <sup>979A</sup> in the use of number by observing a particular unit. But for the purposes of consistently reckoning everything in relation to everything else in terms of

number and, I believe, for a greater purpose too, the god having made the waxing and waning moon, as we have said, also established, in conjunction, the months in relation to the year and so, as a happy outcome, all creatures began to discern number in relation to number. Through these the earth brings forth her fruits and harvests for us, as the winds and rains arise without excess in due measure. But if anything occurs for the worse, contrary <sup>979B</sup> to these measures, the divine nature should not be held responsible. Rather our human nature should be blamed for not arranging our lives justly.

Now in our enquiry into laws it seemed to be easy, in general, to understand what is best for humanity, and that anyone would be up to the task of understanding the various pronouncements and acting upon them provided we understood precisely what is likely to be to our advantage and what is not advantageous. It seemed then, and still seems now, that all the other <sup>979C</sup> pursuits are not particularly difficult, but the question of how we are to become good people is extremely difficult. Again, to acquire all the other so-called good things is possible and not difficult, including the amount of wealth we need or do not need and the sort of body we need or do not need. And everyone agrees with everyone else that the soul should be good and about the way in which it should be good. It should be just, soundminded, and courageous, and everyone maintains that it should be wise too, but as to the sort of wisdom, as we have already explained, <sup>979D</sup> no one agrees at all with anyone else in most cases.

Now however we are discovering, besides all the previous wisdoms, another one which is not without its uses for certain purposes; whoever has learned the subjects we have outlined seems to be wise. But whether the person who is knowledgeable in these subjects is indeed wise and good is a question that needs to be decided.

**Cle:** How right you were Stranger, to say that are trying to come up with important formulations on important issues.

**Ath:** <sup>979E</sup> Indeed Cleinias the issues are not trivial, but the greatest difficulty is that the formulations are to be completely true in every way.

**Cle:** Very much so, Stranger, but you should not tire of saying what you are saying.

**Ath:** Yes, and you two are to keep on listening.

**Cle:** Granted: I am answering on behalf of both of us.

**Ath:** <sup>980A</sup> Very well. To begin with then we need to say first and foremost, it appears, whether or not we are able to capture, in a single word, what we think wisdom is. But if this proves quite impossible for us, we should say, secondly, what and what kinds of wisdom would, according to us, make a person wise if he were to acquire them.

**Cle:** Please proceed.

**Ath:** After this, no reproach will ever be incurred by the lawgiver for presenting a likeness of the gods that is nobler and better than any that have been presented previously, having recourse to a sort of noble game, honouring the gods <sup>980B</sup> and celebrating them with hymns and happiness throughout his own life.

**Cle:** Well said stranger; let this indeed be the objective of your laws, that the life be lived in greater purity, praising the gods, and that it may end in nobility and supreme goodness.

**Ath:** So Cleinias how are we to describe this. Do you think we should honour the gods by singing heartfelt hymns praying that the noblest and best words will come to us? Is this the way, or what do you think?

**Cle:** Yes, that's a wonderful way to proceed. So, good man, have faith in the gods, utter your prayers, and then speak the beautiful words that come to you about the gods and goddesses.

**Ath:** It shall be so provided the god himself guides us. Just join in the prayer.

**Cle:** Speak on.

**Ath:** Well, firstly, since our predecessors did such a bad job of describing the origin of gods and mortal creatures it is necessary for me first to express this better, based upon my previous argument, resuming what I was trying to say to the impious folk. I was saying that there are gods who care for all things great and small and who are more or less incapable of persuasion in matters of justice. I presume that you remember, Cleinias, since you both took notes and indeed what was also said at the time was very true. The most important of these statements was that any soul would be elder than any body. You do recall? This must surely be the case. For it is plausible that the better, more ancient, and more godlike, be elder than the young the younger and the less honourable, and that the ruler be elder in every respect to the ruled and the leader than the led. Let us understand then that soul is elder than body. <sup>981A</sup> But if this is the case our starting point would constitute a more plausible basis for the starting point of creation, and we could then propose that we are embarking aright upon the greatest wisdom, that which concerns the origin of gods.

**Cle:** Let it be so. We have spoken as best we can.

**Ath:** Come on then. May we declare that a living creature may most truly be described, according to its nature, as a combination of soul and body coming together to give rise to a single form?

**Cle:** Correct.

**Ath:** <sup>981B</sup> Is something of this sort then rightly called a living creature?

**Cle:** Yes.

**Ath:** Well, according to the likely account we should say that there are five solid bodies from which the best and most exalted things may be moulded, while the other kind, in its entirety, has a single form. For nothing could be bodiless and always entirely devoid of colour apart from the truly most divine kind which is soul. To this alone, we may say, belongs the function of moulding and fashioning while, according to us, it belongs to body <sup>981C</sup> to be moulded, to be fashioned and to be visible. But we should say once more, for it should be stated more than once, that it belongs to soul to be unseen, to be aware, to be known by reason, and to partake of memory and calculation by odd and even transformations. Now, we should declare that there is fire and water, that air is third, earth fourth, and ether fifth, and

that every creature is perfected, in complexity and variety, by the relative predominance of these bodies. It is necessary to understand these, individually, as follows. We should propose <sup>981D</sup> that the first one is earthy, consisting of all humans, all creatures with many feet, those without feet, those that are mobile, and those that are immobile being held fast by their roots. We should think of these as being one, in the following sense: although these are all composed of all of the kinds, this type is, for the most part, composed of earth and is solid by nature. We should also propose that there is another type of living creature that is also capable of being seen. Indeed it consists mostly of fire although it has earth and <sup>981E</sup> air too and small portions of all the other kinds. And so we should declare that various living creatures, also visible, arise from these constituents, and we should think of them again as being the race of the creatures of the heavens which, we should declare, constitute, collectively, the divine race of stars, each possessed of a perfect body and the happiest and very best soul. To these two we should assign one destiny or the other, proceeding more or less by opinion. For each <sup>982A</sup> of them is either imperishable, immortal and, by absolute necessity, wholly divine, or it is possessed of a life that is long enough for the particular creature none of whom would ever require any more.

So let us, in the first place, bear in mind that according to us there are two creatures of this sort, and we should repeat that both are visible although one seems to be composed wholly of fire, the other of earth. The earthy one moves in a disorderly manner, while the one composed of fire moves in perfect order. The one that moves in a disorderly manner should be thought of as unintelligent, acting for the most part <sup>982B</sup> like the living creatures about us. The one that maintains an orderly course in heaven should provide us with great evidence of being intelligent. Indeed by constantly proceeding, acting, and being acted upon, in the same way, without variation, it would be providing sufficient evidence of living in an intelligent way. The necessity belonging to soul possessed of reason is by far the strongest necessity of all, for soul then gives laws, ruling but not being ruled, and when soul has made the best <sup>982C</sup> decision in accord with supreme reason, the result is unalterable and complete, truly in accord with reason, and not even adamant could ever prove stronger or more unalterable than this. But, in fact, three Fates hold fast and keep watch to ensure the completion of whatever has been decided, with perfect deliberation, by any of the gods. But for humanity there should have been adequate proof that the stars and their entire proceedings are possessed of reason in the fact that they always do the same things because they are acting out deliberations of ancient date, made a wondrously long time ago, <sup>982D</sup> and they do not alter their decision this way and that, doing one thing at one moment and something different the next, as they wander and change their orbits. This conclusion of ours is the very opposite of what most people believe. They think that whatever does the same things without variation does not possess soul. Hence most people have taken their lead from the unintelligent; they assume that humans are intelligent and alive because they are moving, while the divine race is unintelligent because its orbits remain the same. But humanity could have relied upon the more beautiful, <sup>982E</sup> the better, the friendly, to understand that whatever is the same and unvarying and always acts accordingly should, for this very reason, be regarded as intelligent. Such is the nature of the stars, most beautiful to behold, as they dance the most beautiful and exalted dance movement of all, to satisfy the need of every living creature. And indeed, to

justify our claim that they have souls <sup>983A</sup> we should first consider their size. For they are not small as they appear to be; each of them is, rather, of enormous bulk. This conclusion deserves to be believed because there are ample proofs. Indeed, it is possible to appreciate, correctly, that the sun as a whole is larger than the entire earth and that all the moving stars are possessed of wondrous magnitude. We should decide then how it might be possible that some nature can cause such an enormous bulk to revolve always in the same period, as the stars now revolve. Well I maintain that God <sup>983B</sup> will be the cause, otherwise this is not possible at all. For as we have shown, nothing could ever become ensouled except through God. And since God is capable of this it is extremely easy, in the first place, for any body or any complete bulk to become a living creature and be moved in whatever way God thinks best. In which case we may now state one true argument in relation to all of these. It is not possible that earth and the heaven, <sup>983C</sup> all of the stars, and the complete masses formed from them, should proceed with such precision by the year the month and the day, and that all these happenings benefit all of us, without soul being present to each or indeed in each of them.

Insofar as a human being is debased it is necessary that he avoid mere blabbering and prove to be speaking sensibly. Now anyone who speaks of the surges or natures of bodies as causes will not be talking sense. But what we have said needs to be re-examined seriously <sup>983D</sup> to decide whether it makes sense or completely falls short. Firstly, there are two things, body and soul, and there are many instances of each, all different from one another with either kind being different from the other kind, there is no third thing common to both and, finally, soul is distinct from body. We shall propose that one is presumably intelligent, the other devoid of intelligence, one rules while the other is ruled, one is the cause of all while the other is not the cause of any effect. And so it is most foolish and unreasonable to maintain that whatever is in the heaven <sup>983E</sup> has come into being by some other agency and is not the product of soul and body as we say it is. Now if our arguments about everything of this sort are to prevail, and they are all, collectively, to be shown, without doubt, to be of divine origin, one or the other of two things must be said of them: either they are to be glorified as actual gods, or they are to be understood <sup>984A</sup> as images of gods, created representations, fashioned by the gods themselves. For the artificers were neither devoid of intelligence nor were they of lesser rate but, as we have said, one option or the other should be adopted and whatever representations are adopted should be honoured far more than all others. For having been generated entirely in this way, no representations would ever appear more beautiful, none more common to humanity as a whole, more established in exalted places or more pure, solemn, and distinguished <sup>984B</sup> in their overall manner of life than this.

Now, in relation to gods, we should undertake this much: having discerned two kinds of creature, both visible, one, we maintain, being immortal, the other, the earthy, being mortal, we should attempt to speak of the three that are in between these two, the middle three of the five, doing so with the utmost clarity based upon reasoned opinion. Indeed we should place ether above fire and propose that soul fashions, from this, living creatures possessing power belonging for the most part to the nature of ether. The same holds for the other four kinds, <sup>984C</sup> although there are lesser portions of the other kinds to act as a unifying bond. After ether we should propose that soul fashions a different kind of creature from air, and a third from

water. And soul having wrought all these is likely to have filled the entire heaven full of living creatures using all five kinds according to their power, all having come into being partaking of life. These are second, third, fourth, and fifth in descent from the manifest gods, <sup>984D</sup> ending with us humans.

As for the gods such as Zeus, Hera and all the others, anyone may propose whatever they wish but in accordance with the same convention, and this account must be adhered to. The visible gods then, the greatest, the most honoured, the keenest of sight, must be said to be first. These are the stars and whatever else we observe among their cohort. After these and below these in order are the daimons, <sup>984E</sup> the airy type, occupying the third and middle position, responsible for interpretation, whom we should greatly honour in our prayers to ensure that they convey auspicious messages. Two of the creatures one being of ether, the one after it being of air, each of them being entirely transparent, are not clearly visible to us in spite of their proximity. Partaking of a wondrous intelligence <sup>985A</sup> since they constitute a race that learns and remembers with ease, we should declare that they are aware of the entire content of our minds, take delight in the noble and good, and hate the utterly ignoble since they do share in the experience of pain. For although a god perfected in divine destiny is beyond pleasure and pain, he does partake of total wisdom and understanding. And the heaven has been filled <sup>985B</sup> full of living creatures, who all interpret towards one another and towards all the supreme gods, because the creatures of the middle region move easily and gently over the earth and the entire heaven. As for the fifth substance we would not go far astray in comparing whatever is produced from this to a demigod that is sometimes visible sometimes hidden and invisible, providing us with a wondrous spectacle of obscurity. <sup>985C</sup>

Now since there are indeed these five living creatures, howsoever any of us have encountered them, coming across them in dreams whilst asleep, in prophetic statements and utterances heard in health or in disease, or meeting with them at the end of our lives, beliefs develop in individuals or in communities from which various sacred traditions of many peoples have arisen and will arise. And no lawgiver possessed of reason even to the slightest extent would ever dare to engage in innovation in any of these and turn <sup>985D</sup> his own city over to some service of God that is insecure. Nor indeed will he obstruct whatever the ancestral law has decreed concerning sacrifices when he knows nothing at all about this since the mortal nature is quite unable to understand such matters as these. The same argument holds for the gods who are actually evident to us: vile indeed are those who dare not speak of them and reveal that there are these other gods, bereft of rituals, receiving not the honours that are due to them. But something like this is actually happening <sup>985E</sup> nowadays. What if one of us, having seen the sun and moon coming into existence and watching over us all, said nothing, being somehow unable to speak, showing no eagerness to play our part, leaving these deprived of honours, reluctant to elevate them to an exalted status, institute festivals and sacrifices for them assigning special times to them, and determining the durations of their various annual <sup>986A</sup> cycles? Wouldn't it be agreed then by the man himself or anyone who understood the situation that he might rightly be referred to as a bad man?

**Cle:** Of course, stranger, the worst of men.

**Ath:** Well then dear Cleinias, mark my words, this is clearly what I am engaged in now.

**Cle:** How so?

**Ath:** Note that there are, in the entire heaven, eight powers that are kindred to one another. These I have observed, and this is no great achievement, <sup>986B</sup> in fact it is easy for anyone. Three of these belong, in one case to the sun in another to the moon, and to the stars we have mentioned a little earlier. There are five others. Now there are all these powers and those which either proceed in these powers or, being borne in chariots, proceed accordingly. But let no one of us ever believe, idly, that some of these are gods while others are not, that some are exalted in their lineage, while others are the sort of beings that none of us may lawfully declare them to be. Instead, we should all declare and proclaim <sup>986C</sup> that these are all kindred and share a kindred destiny. And we should bestow honours, not assigning the year to one, the month to another, and to others no portion or time period in which they traverse their own orbit, completing an order which reason, most divine of all, has ordained to be visible. Happy is the man who, in the first place, wonders at all this and then develops a passion for understanding as much about this as our mortal nature will allow, deeming this to be the best and most fortunate way to spend <sup>986D</sup> his life, and attain after death the regions where excellence abides. Then, having been initiated into truth and reality, being one himself and possessed of one wisdom, he will thereafter have a perfect vision of all that is most beautiful, as far as sight allows.

What remains for us is to say what and how many of these beings there are, for we should never <sup>986E</sup> prove false. I affirm then, with certainty, this much at least: indeed, I say, once more, that there are eight orbits, three of which have been described already while five still remain. The fourth motion or circuit, together with the fifth, travels at more or less the same speed as the sun and, in general, neither slower nor faster. The leader of these three must be the one that is sufficiently possessed of reason. Let us say that these are the orbits of the sun, the dawn-bearer, and a third whose name we cannot utter because it is unknown, the reason being the person who first observed these was a non-Greek.

An ancient circumstance <sup>987A</sup> encouraged the first observers. Because Egypt and Syria are blessed with an excellent summer season they had a more or less continuous view of all the stars since clouds and rains are consistently absent from that part of the world. And so their observations, well tested over a vast, nay limitless period of time, have spread abroad and arrived here. Therefore, we must be courageous enough to pass laws for these since it obviously makes no sense that some divinities are honoured while others are not; as for the fact that they do not have names, <sup>987B</sup> the explanation is that they have in fact been named after gods. For the dawn bearer which is the same as the evening star is, by common account, the star of Aphrodite and this is a most appropriate name for a Syrian convention setter to assign. That which runs its course more or less along with this and with the sun too, is the star of Hermes. We should also mention three further orbits of bodies proceeding to the right along with the moon and the sun. And we should also mention one, the eighth, which may especially be referred to as the Kosmos, proceeding in the opposite direction to all those, leading the others, or so it might seem to humans with little knowledge of such matters. But we need to say whatever we are up to the task of saying <sup>987C</sup> and that is what we are doing. For to someone who has experienced even a little sound and divine reflection the actual truth

seems somehow to lie in this direction. Three stars remain, one of which is much slower than the others and some people take this to be the star of Kronos, the next slowest should be called the star of Zeus and after this comes the star of Ares which has the reddest colour of all. None of these phenomena are difficult to apprehend <sup>987D</sup> once someone has described them but, as we are saying, it is necessary for someone who has understood the matter to take the lead.

Now there is something that every Greek should understand: the region we Greeks inhabit is perhaps the best of all for the acquisition of human excellence. And in praise of this it should be explained that our climate is a mean between the extremes of winter and summer, and our summer climate, being inferior to the climate in that region yonder, has as we said, delayed our appreciation of the order that belongs to these gods. But we may assume that whatever we Greeks acquire <sup>987E</sup> from non-Greeks we take to a higher level of perfection. And indeed we should keep in mind that the same holds for the topics we are now discussing. Although such matters as these are difficult to investigate with certainty there is, nevertheless, a great <sup>988A</sup> and noble expectation that we Greeks will exercise a better and indeed a more just concern for all these gods than the tradition and worship that has come from the non-Greeks. For we will make use of instruction and prophecy that comes from Delphi, and the entire system of worship ordained by our laws. And let none of us Greeks ever harbour the fear that mere mortals must refrain from engagement with matters divine. We should hold the very opposite view, that the divine is never devoid of intelligence nor somehow ignorant of our human <sup>988B</sup> nature. It knows, rather, that under divine instruction we shall follow along and learn whatever is being taught. And the divine knows of course that the very thing it teaches and what we, for our part, learn, is number and counting. For the divine would be utterly mindless if it were unaware of this, indeed, as the saying goes, it would be ignorant of its own self, angered by someone's ability to learn, rather than sharing without envy in the joy of someone who had become good, with the help of God.

Now there is an account, widespread and <sup>988C</sup> plausible, that there was a time when humans had their initial conceptions of the gods and how they came into being and the sort of beings they were and how they engaged in various activities. But the accounts were neither acceptable nor to the liking of the sound minded, nor could they accept the subsequent accounts in which priority was attributed to fire and water and other bodies, and lower status given to the wondrous soul. Accounts whereby the more exalted and revered motion was the motion allotted to the body to move itself by means of heat and cold and the like rather than the motion of the soul, moving both itself and the body. <sup>988D</sup> But now, since we are saying that soul, once it has actually come to be present in the body naturally moves and circulates both itself and the body, there are no reasonable grounds to doubt the ability of the soul to set any mass in motion. Since we maintain that soul is the cause of the whole, and the causes of all good things are like those things, while the causes of bad things, on the other hand, are other things of that sort, it is no wonder that soul is the cause of all circulation and motion, <sup>988E</sup> that the circulation and motion towards the good belongs to the best soul while the opposite holds for the opposite kind of soul, and anything that is good must prevail, now and ever, over its opposite.

We have said all this according to justice, the avenger of those who are unholy. But, regarding the matter under scrutiny, we cannot but believe that we should regard the good as wise. As for the wisdom <sup>989A</sup> we have sought for so long we should see whether we can discern this in some education or skill whose lack of recognition among the just would render us ignorant for being like this. I must explain. For having sought this wisdom high up and low down I shall attempt to reveal it to you in the way that it has become evident to me. Indeed I am strongly of the view, as indicated by what has just been said, <sup>989B</sup> that our failures in practising the most important part of excellence is responsible for our predicament. And it must be said that, for our mortal race there is no part of excellence more important than reverence, and we should never be persuaded to the contrary.

But through the utmost ignorance this reverence has not arisen in the very best natures. The very best natures are those that, although they come into existence only with extreme difficulty, nevertheless confer enormous benefit when they do arise. For the soul that quietly accepts its due measure of lethargy and its opposite would be good-natured, admire courage, and be easily persuaded towards sound-mindedness. And, most importantly in such <sup>989C</sup> natures, soul is able to learn, has a good memory and is able to delight in these qualities and thus develop a love of learning. For although these qualities are not easy to develop, once they have arisen and have encountered the nurture and education they need they would be able to constrain the majority of people, the baser sort, in the right way, to think, act, and speak about the gods as they should and when they should in relation to sacrifices and purifications belonging to the gods and to humans, not as a mere outward show, but truly valuing excellence, <sup>989D</sup> which is indeed of the utmost importance for anyone in any city. According to us then, this part is by nature the most exalted, and well capable of learning all that is noblest and best, provided there is a teacher. But there would be no teaching unless God were to take the lead. And if someone were to teach but did so in an improper manner it would be better not to learn from such a teacher. Nevertheless, from what we are now saying it is necessary that such a nature, the very best, should learn these things and that I should say so.

<sup>989E</sup> Let us attempt then to give an account explaining what these things are, their characteristics, and how they should be learned, to the best of my ability as the speaker and <sup>990A</sup> your abilities as listeners. So in what way may someone learn to serve God? Now although it may sound strange on first hearing, we should at least state its name, a name which someone with no experience of the subject would never guess. The subject is astronomy, but people are unaware that the true astronomer must necessarily be utterly wise. He should not engage in astronomy as did Hesiod and so many others like him by observing risings and settings rather than observing seven orbits of the eight as they each <sup>990B</sup> proceed in a way that would be beyond the capacity of most natures to discern easily. An exceptional nature would be required. This has now been stated and we shall, I propose, explain how and in what way it should be learned. But we must begin by saying the following: the moon traverses its orbit fastest bringing the month and the full moon first. Next we should observe the sun throughout its entire cycle and those bodies that run their course along with it as it brings the solstices. Now to avoid constantly repeating the same things on the same topics let's just say that the other orbits of these bodies as described previously are not easy to

understand, and to produce natures that are up to the task it is necessary to work hard and consistently at basic education and training in childhood and youth. Certain studies would therefore be required. First and foremost is that of numbers themselves, devoid of anything physical, concerned rather with the overall generation of odd and even and the influence this has upon the nature of things that are.

<sup>990D</sup> Having learned this, what comes next goes by the very strange name of geometry which by reference to part of plane surfaces produces a likeness of numbers that are not by nature like one another. Now it should be evident to anyone who could understand this marvel that it is no mere human contrivance but divine in origin. After this are numbers that multiply threefold and are like unto the three dimensional. Then again those that are unlike are made like by a different skill which those who are acquainted <sup>990E</sup> with it call stereometry (the measurement of solids). This is godly and a wonder to those who look closely and appreciate that nature in its entirety <sup>991A</sup> in the case of each ratio, is continually turning power and the opposite to this about the double. Now the first progression of the double is based upon the numerical proportion of one to two [1,2,4...], while the double of this progression is based upon their powers [1, 4, 16...]. The double of this again is the proceeding from one to eight, to the solid and tangible [1,8, 64...]. The proceeding to a mean of the double, lying equally between the greater and the lesser, or to a different mean that exceeds and is exceeded by the same proportion of its own extremes, both occur in between six and twelve, <sup>991B</sup> as the ratios three to two and four to three. In the means between these themselves, in both senses, the benefit of consonance and symmetry is bestowed upon humanity in furtherance of the play of rhythm and harmony, a gift from the blessed chorus of the Muses.

So much then for all these matters: let them be as we have described them. But to bring them to a conclusion we should proceed to a divine creation that is at once most beautiful to behold and indeed the most divine production of any that God has allowed us humans to have sight of. But no one can ever claim to have understood this easily without a clear vision of everything we are now explaining. <sup>991C</sup> As well as this we must apply that which is based upon one to that which is based upon form, in all our studies, questioning and challenging whatever is badly formulated. Indeed, for us humans, this constitutes the first and most excellent test of all, while tests that pretend to be this test but are not, prove to be the most barren endeavour of all. We must also grasp the precision of the timing, and how precisely all the phenomena of the heaven <sup>991D</sup> are completed, so that anyone who has come to believe in the truth of our argument that the soul is older than body and more divine too, would come to the view that it is right and reasonable to declare that “everything is full of gods” and that we will never be neglected by our superiors through their forgetfulness or inattention.

In relation to all matters of this sort it is necessary to bear in mind that if someone understands each of these aright a great benefit accrues to whoever understands systematically, otherwise the best course is always to call upon God. It is necessary <sup>991E</sup> to explain what we mean by “systematically”. Every geometric construction, every numerical system and harmonic structure and the unified agreement of all the circuits of the stars, should be revealed to the person who learns systematically. And revealed they shall be if, as we say, a person learns aright by looking towards one. For <sup>992A</sup> a single bond naturally uniting

all these will be revealed to those who think about things in this way. But if someone engages in these studies in some other way he should, as we say invoke Good Fortune. For without these studies no happy person will make an appearance in our cities. This is the system, this is the upbringing, these are the subjects, and whether it be difficult or easy this is the course along which we must proceed. And it is not permissible to disregard the gods now that our systematic declaration about them all has been disclosed so successfully.

<sup>992B</sup> Whoever has grasped all these subjects together is deemed by me as truly the wisest. Of such a person, I insist, in jest and in all seriousness too, that when his destiny is fulfilled in death, if we may say that he still persists after death, he will no longer partake of a multiplicity of perceptions as he does now. Having a share of one destiny alone, having become one from many, he will be happy and wise and blessed too and whether he lives <sup>992C</sup> this blessed life on continents or on certain islands he will forever share in good fortune of this sort and whether he has spent his time here in public life, or as a private citizen he will, at the hands of the gods, experience the same advantages in the same way.

The same argument is presenting itself now, the one we stated at the very outset, and it really is true that with few exceptions it is not possible for us humans to be perfectly blessed and happy. These statements are correct. For only those who are divine and sound-minded and naturally share in excellence in general and, furthermore, have grasped everything that is contained in the blessed subject, and we have explained what this involves, only these people adequately acquire and retain the entire spiritual content. And so, we maintain in private, and enact in public in our laws, that those who work at these studies in the right way should be awarded the highest positions of authority in their advanced later years. The others, speaking reverently towards all the gods and goddesses, are to follow such people and it is only right that all of us having properly recognised this wisdom and put it to the test, <sup>992E</sup> should call upon the nocturnal council to pursue it too.

## **END OF EPINOMIS**