

Plato's Dream

Voltaire

In ancient times, dreams were much revered, and Plato was one of the greatest dreamers. His dream *The Republic* is deservedly famous, but the following little-known tale is perhaps his most amazing dream—or nightmare:

The great Demiurgos, the eternal geometer, having scattered throughout the immensity of space innumerable worlds, decided to test the knowledge of those lesser superbeings who were also his creations, and who had witnessed his works. He gave them each a small portion of matter to arrange, just as our own art teachers give their students a statue to carve, or a picture to paint, if we may compare small things to great.

Demogorgon received the lump of mold we call Earth, and having formed it as it now appears, thought he had created a masterpiece. He imagined he had silenced Envy herself, and expected to receive the highest praise, even from his brethren. How great was his surprise, when, at the presentation of his work, they hissed in disapproval!

One among them, more sarcastic than the rest, spoke:

“Truly you have performed mighty feats! You have divided your world into two parts; and, to prevent them from communicating with each other, placed a vast collection of waters between the two hemispheres. The inhabitants must perish with cold under both your poles, and be scorched to death under the equator. You have, in your great prudence, formed immense deserts of sand, so all who travel over them may die with hunger and thirst. I have no fault to find with your cows, sheep, cocks, and hens; but can never be reconciled to your serpents and spiders. Your onions and artichokes are very good things, but I cannot conceive what induced you to scatter such a heap of poisonous plants over the face of the planet, unless it was to poison its inhabitants. Moreover, if I am not mistaken, you have created about 30 different kinds of monkeys, a still greater number of dogs, yet only four or five races of humans. It is true, indeed, you have bestowed on the latter of these animals a

faculty you call Reason, but it is so poorly executed that you might better call it Folly. Besides, you do not seem to have shown any very great regard for this two-legged creature, seeing you have left him with so few means of defense; subjected him to so many disorders, and provided him with so few remedies; and formed him with such a multitude of passions, and so little wisdom and prudence to resist them. You certainly were not willing that there should remain any great number of these animals on Earth at once; for, over the course of a given year, smallpox will regularly carry off a tenth of the species, and sister maladies will taint the springs of life in the remainder; and then, as if this was not enough, you have so disposed things that half of those who survive are occupied in lawsuits, or cutting each other's throats. Yes, they must be infinitely grateful to you, and I must admit that you have executed a masterpiece."

Demogorgon blushed. He now realized there was much moral and physical evil in his work, but still believed it contained more good than ill.

"It is easy to find fault," he said; "but do you imagine it is so easy to form an animal, who, having the gift of reason and free will, shall not sometimes abuse his liberty? Do you think that, in rearing 10,000 plants, it is so easy to prevent some few from having noxious qualities? Do you suppose that, with a certain quantity of water, sand, and mud, you could make a globe without sea or desert?"

"As for you, my sneering friend, I think you have just finished the planet Jupiter. Let us see now what figure you make with your great belts, and your long nights, with four moons to enlighten them. Let us examine your worlds, and see whether the inhabitants you have made are exempt from folly and disease."

Accordingly, his fellow entities examined the planet Jupiter, and were soon laughing at the laughter. He who had made Saturn did not escape without his share of censure, and his fellows, the makers of Mars, Mercury, and Venus, was each in his turn reproached.

They were in the midst of railing against and ridiculing each other, when the eternal Demiurgos thus imposed silence on them all:

“In your performances there is both good and bad, because you have a great share of understanding, but at the same time fall short of perfection. Your works will endure for only a few billion years, after which you will acquire more knowledge and perform much better. It belongs to me alone to create things perfect and immortal.”

“Us, for example?” asked Demogorgon.

Demiurgos scowled, and with that Plato awoke.

Or did he?