

The Seed and the Soul in Plato's Dialogues

This paper examines parallels in Plato's dialogues between cultivation of the earth by farmers and other, metaphorical, kinds of sowing and cultivation. Following the assertion of Samaras (2012) that, in the *Laws*, engaging in farm work does not exclude one from attaining moral virtue, I examine instances where Plato portrays agricultural activity as a commendable pursuit comparable in some ways to the work of philosophers and even gods. Numerous scholars have investigated Plato's use of herding metaphors to link the work of the gods with that of humans (e.g. Pfeffer Merrill 2003 and Zöllner 2010); his references to seeds and sowing have not received the same attention. Skemp (1947) examines plants in Plato as nutriment for humans and as living creatures with sensations, but he passes over Plato's discussions of the place of farmers in society and the agricultural metaphors he uses to explain the work of philosophers and gods.

First, I identify three main uses of the soul-as-seed metaphor in Plato. In the first case, Plato uses language of seeds and sowing to communicate aspects of human sexual intercourse (e.g., *Republic* 460b; *Laws* 838e-839b, 841d, and 775d-e; *Timaeus* 86c-d and 91a-c). In each of these examples Plato depicts men as sowers of seed and women as fields to be plowed and sown, with the next generation of people as the crop they produce (see also *Theaetetus* 149e). In the second case, Plato represents the human soul as immortal seed to be sown in the mortal body: the demiurge sows the "seed" (πανσπερμίαν) of the immortal soul into the "field" (οἶον ἄρουραν) of the newly-created human brain (*Timaeus* 73c-e). The demiurge then designs the skull as a sort of stony fence to protect the freshly-sown cerebral field (74a). Finally, I examine passages where Plato figures humans and other animals as "seeds" (σπέρμα) that are sown in the earth to complete the formation of the universe according to the dictates of the demiurge (*Timaeus* 42d;

Statesman 272e). Other gods then provide humans with the literal seeds and plants they will need to cultivate in order to survive on their own (*Statesman* 274c).

By characterizing the work of the gods in these passages as agricultural activity, Plato ennobles the work of human farmers. If the gods sowed our souls as seeds, then we are doing quasi-divine work when we sow our literal fields with crops to support human life in the city. Plato also uses agricultural terminology or imagery to explain the process of educating others, practicing justice, and creating laws, all important tasks for a philosopher-statesman (e.g. *Laws* 777e). At *Phaedrus* 276b, Socrates uses the example of a farmer who has *vóoc* to illustrate the kind of sensible, specialized decision-making that a philosopher uses in his own art.

While it is true that Plato includes farmers and other craftsmen in the lowest class of his three-tiered city of the *Republic* and characterizes them as less driven by honor than the auxiliary warriors who will defend the city and less capable of the higher reasoning faculties necessary to be effective statesmen, we should not take this as evidence that he thinks them to be lowly. They are much closer to the ideal just man of the *Republic* than actors or artists, for example, who simply entertain or even corrupt the citizens and youth (370c, 373b-c). Plato clearly does not esteem farmers *as highly as* his fellow philosophers, but he does recognize and appreciate the work that they perform for the city: by helping the community to meet the basic human need for food, farmers allow everyone else in society to do the work best suited for them rather than having to spend their time and energy producing their own nourishment. As Saunders (1992) points out, according to the *Laws*, wealth in Plato's ideal state is derived from agriculture, not trade. Good farmers in Plato's dialogues and in the modern world are knowledgeable and diligent members of society who contribute to the public good by doing the work best suited for

them and by providing a crucial service that allows societies and individuals to thrive and seek justice.

Bibliography

Pfeffer Merrill, J. (2003) "The Organization of Plato's 'Statesman' and the Statesman's Rule as a Herdsman." *Phoenix* 57 (1/2), pp. 35-56.

Samaras, T. (2012) "Leisured Aristocrats or Warrior-Farmers? Leisure in Plato's *Laws*." *Classical Philology* 107 (1), pp. 1-20.

Saunders, T.J. (1992) "Plato's Later Political Thought." In *Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Richard Kraut, ed.), pp. 464-492.

Skemp, J.B. (1947) "Plants in Plato's *Timaeus*." *The Classical Quarterly* 41 (1-2), pp. 53-60.

Zöller, C. P. (2010) "To 'Graze Freely in the Pastures of Philosophy': The Pedagogical Methods and Political Motives of Socrates and the Sophists." *Polis* (Exeter) 27 (1), pp. 80-110.