Philosophy of nature is one of the thriving fields in Platonic studies today, and it is still bound to expand even more in the near future. However exciting and prolific the recent years may have been in this domain, there is still a lot to discover, and current limits in international Plato studies need to be overcome for substantial progress to be made in some of these uncharted territories where a new image of Plato awaits. We need to broaden our historical angle before our Plato may take his full place in the wider context of the history of scientific ideas of the Greeks and of the development of their ideas about nature. We need to get rid of the idea that Plato is not a « natural » philosopher, not a φυσικός – more of a metaphysician, merely able to hint at some of the intuitions Aristotle would properly develop soon after him. It seems paradoxical that such a view has sometimes been adopted by the very scholars who would attach themselves to the study of Plato’s natural philosophy in some academic cultures of Platonic studies.

However interesting Aristotle’s view on his predecessors might be, we cannot take it for granted in a historical investigation. Nor can we accept at face value Aristotle’s definition of φύσις: the very distinction he makes between the natural and the artificial – what kind of beings belong to the former and what kind of beings belong to the latter – cannot be taken, however familiar it sounds to the Western or Westernised ear, as a self-evident frame for all Greek thought of the previous centuries, as if this very distinction was not also the product of a specific history. Plato challenges the boundaries of the natural and the artificial, of the natural and the cultural, of the natural and the political; to follow him on this path entails challenging the very framework in which we are accustomed to think. Plato’s “physics” might encompass more stuff than we would actually find in a

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1 I want to warmly thank Gretchen Reydams-Schils for her discussion of my presentation: many points have been improved thanks to her comments, both in the content and in the phrasing of my English. The remaining shortcomings are my own fault.

2 See for instance Gregory (2000) and Johansen (2004), who share such a view. In the English speaking world, this trend is probably due to the influence of G. E. R Lloyd (see Lloyd 1968 and 1991). It stands in contrast to previous presentations of Plato’s natural philosophy in English, such as Cornford (1935) and Cherniss (1945).
contemporary handbook of physics, or a different set of objects at least. So there are two directions in which we need to move and take a few risks:

(1) We need to see Plato in the wider context of the history of cosmology, of the theory of bodily interactions, etc., and in order to do this, we have to get rid of the idea that he does not really belong together with the Greek thinkers who examine what nature is, what kind of motions there are, how material and mechanical causes interact, what is the speed, weight, size, structure of all things that move randomly and still create such patterns and order that we can actually start recognizing in them something that could be an object of knowledge.

(2) There will be no correct assessment of Plato’s philosophy of nature if we do not accept to treat the concepts of “nature” and its correlates (society, art, convention, etc.) in their historical context, and accept to construct them according to the manner in which Plato himself actually presents them in his own words. This approach might take us to unfamiliar landscapes, where nature, society, and the soul are all aspects of the same kind of powerful reality. The originality of Plato will then appear in the context of the history of the many ways men of all times and societies (not only Western) have tried and gathered all beings into sets that they could then relate or oppose to each other. Recent anthropology has shown how grouping things in sets called “nature” and “society” is an idea that belongs to the specific history of the West. Plato goes beyond such borders. This is very good news as Platonic studies of the XXIth century are already, and will be more and more written outside the West – especially on the shores of Asia. Plato, who was for a long time the father of Western culture, is ready for more.

What is nature? Challenging the boundaries of the natural

Are we sure where to find the Plato physicus? The Timaeus seems the obvious choice – and many studies on the Timaeus carry the label of Plato’s “natural philosophy”. This assumption might be right, but then again, we do not want to presuppose conceptual frameworks before we assess their own historicity.

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