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REINCARNATION AND REHABILITATION: THE THEODICY OF PLATO'S *TIMAEUS*

by

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Under the Direction of Timothy O'Keefe, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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in the College of Arts and Sciences

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## ABSTRACT

Plato wonders why a good God might allow the existence of evil. This problem is especially pertinent to his dialogue *Timaeus*, in which Plato describes the creation of the cosmos by a benevolent divine craftsman called the Demiurge. A justification for why God allows evil to exist is called a theodicy. Readers of the *Timaeus* have interpreted the theodicy of this dialogue in many ways. After showing the shortcomings of some common interpretations, I offer a largely original interpretation of the theodicy of the *Timaeus*. I claim that in the *Timaeus* evil is caused by conflict between souls, and this conflict is something that the good (but not omnipotent) Demiurge could not avoid. However, I think that Plato's Demiurge may have made the best of this imperfect situation by placing souls in a cycle of reincarnation that functions as a rehabilitative punishment, and thereby ordering the cosmos for their redemption.

INDEX WORDS: Plato, *Timaeus*, theodicy, reincarnation, punishment, soul, matter, cosmology

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Reincarnation and Rehabilitation: the Theodicy of Plato's *Timaeus*

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## **DEDICATION**

For Mom and Dad, and Aliyah Sheffield, all of whom made this work possible with their love and encouragement.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The scope of Plato's *Timaeus* is impressive. In this dialogue, Plato engages in speculative cosmology, with forays into physics, metaphysics, biology, and theology as well. He explains the origins of the universe as an act of creation by a powerful and benevolent creator god called the Demiurge, who formed the cosmos into a harmonious whole from preexistent matter with the assistance of lesser divine beings whom he also created. One of the many ways in which this dialogue is unique is the concern for what is now known as the problem of evil in a Hellenic and pre-Christian context. The problem of evil is usually thought to be a problem only for traditions like the Abrahamic religions, which profess belief in a God who is not only omnibenevolent and omniscient, but also all powerful. It seems unlikely that a God who is perfectly good, aware of the existence of evil, and capable of preventing it, would allow evil to exist. Thus, the existence of evil and suffering suggests that such a God does not exist. A justification for why God allows evil is called a theodicy. Unlike the Abrahamic religions, Plato's supreme God, the Demiurge, is not omnipotent. There seem to be determinate restrictions on his power. Yet because the Demiurge is good and still very powerful, it is surprising that Plato's Demiurge would allow evil to exist. Plato is aware of this, and he does not want to blame any of the gods for evil. He says explicitly in the *Timaeus* that blaming the gods for evil would be impious and that the gods in fact ought not to be blamed for evil (29a, 42d). But it is not clear exactly how Plato wishes to excuse the gods, and readers of the *Timaeus* have interpreted the theodicy of this dialogue in a variety of ways.

I disagree with two common interpretations of Plato's theodicy in the *Timaeus*. First, that Plato blames matter for the existence of evil, and second, that he absolves the gods of responsibility for evil by making individual souls entirely responsible for their actions. Neither of these interpretations is correct. I think Plato believes that evil is inevitably brought about by conflict

between souls, arising from the incidental opposition of souls' motions as they share the finite amount of matter in the universe. And it is not because individual souls are entirely responsible for their actions that the gods are absolved of responsibility for evil. Plato's moral psychology in the *Timaeus* is not compatible with his holding souls entirely responsible for their actions, and therefore, Plato cannot on those grounds absolve the gods of responsibility for evil, and I think there is textual evidence that strongly suggests that he does not try to do so. I will conclude with two possible interpretations of the theodicy of the *Timaeus*. Plato may think, somewhat pessimistically, that the goodness of the Demiurge compels him to realize the good of the universe as a whole even at the expense of the welfare of its individual inhabitants. Or, more optimistically, Plato may think that the Demiurge uses a cycle of reincarnation that serves as a rehabilitative punishment for vicious souls, to care providentially for both the universe as a whole *and* its individual inhabitants. Though both are viable interpretations, I will suggest that we have good reason to think that the optimistic theodicy is more likely to be Plato's position.

## **2 MATTER IS NOT THE SOURCE OF EVIL**

### **2.1 Matter, Chaos, and Disorderly Motion**

Before the Demiurge organized matter into the elements, it was disordered chaos (*Timaeus* 53b). And a tendency towards disorder, which lingers from the state prior to the formation of the elements, is supposed by Gregory Vlastos and M. Meldrum to be the cause of evil: "Plato assumes that embodiment involves a certain degradation for the form," says Meldrum, and therefore, "The Demiurge does his best with these materials and succeeds on the whole, but to some extent they

resist, and the evil of the world is simply this element of disorder that survives from the chaos” (1950, 66).<sup>1</sup>

But there is no reason to assume that after being organized by the Demiurge, matter would still tend towards disorderly motion of its own accord. Perhaps matter moved in a disorderly fashion only because God had yet to organize it, but once organized it could move in an orderly fashion for the rest of eternity. Sarah Broadie thinks this, claiming that, “The god who regulated them (the materials composing the elements) geometrically no more faced resistance than the orthodox god who creates *ex nihilo*” (2008, 3). That Broadie is correct can be seen by considering the nature of the greatest creation of the Demiurge, the cosmos, which is itself a god (34b).

The way the cosmos is made by the Demiurge to be a blessed and beautiful god, completely in accord with the purposes of the Demiurge, shows why matter cannot be the principle of evil in the *Timaeus*. Unlike human souls in their bodies, the world-soul is completely at home in its body, the physical cosmos. The titular Timaeus says that the Demiurge “wanted nothing more than to make the world like the best of intelligible things, *complete in every way*” (30d-31a, my emphasis).<sup>2</sup> To make the cosmos as good as possible, the Demiurge crafted it so that it was free of all disturbances. The body of the cosmos was fashioned as a sphere, the most excellent of shapes because of its perfect uniformity, and made totally complete, containing all matter and all living things so that no foreign bodies could disturb it (33a-b). And so unlike mortal bodies it does not need sense organs, because, containing all matter, its body is entirely self-sufficient. It does not need anything external for nourishment, and there are no bodies that exist outside of it anyway. And so the Demiurge made “a single solitary universe, whose very excellence enables it to keep

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<sup>1</sup> See also, “the cause of evil is disorderly motion” and, “chaos must... be in constant motion” (Vlastos 1939, pp. 80-81).

<sup>2</sup> All translations of Plato are from Cooper’s *The Complete Works*.

its own company without requiring anything else” (34b). Thus, the body of the cosmic god causes none of the disturbances in its soul that motivate Plato’s usual criticisms of bodies.

The self-sufficient blessedness of the cosmic god suggests that Plato’s criticism of embodiment is not a criticism of embodiment as such, but of *mortal* embodiment. Mortal bodies possess sense organs, because they are not self-sufficient. They need nourishment to survive, and this need for nourishment causes the desires that distract the immortal soul from its true nature, which is why these souls strive to escape embodiment. And in this dialogue, escape from embodiment is the reward for living a just life (42b). But the world-soul has no desire to escape its body, which perfectly serves its purpose of assisting the world-soul in contemplation of itself (34b). If the matter composing its body still contained a tendency towards disorderly motion, the body of the cosmic god would be a source of disturbance, but nothing disturbs the cosmic god’s soul. When Timaeus describes the motions of the cosmos, while there are many motions described, there is no tendency towards disorder in its movements (36c-e). Therefore, if matter can participate in perfectly ordered motion without any lingering tendency towards disorder, then matter cannot be the ultimate cause of evil, at least in the way that Vlastos and Meldrum claim.

## 2.2 Matter as Privation or Non-being

Even if matter is not a source of disorderly motion, it could be the source of evil in other ways. Plotinus claims that matter is the source of evil in the *Timaeus* because of matter’s allegedly negative and indefinite nature. Plotinus insists that matter as such is pure privation, or utter non-being. It is the lowest link of the chain of being in his metaphysics (which he believes is merely an explication of Plato’s metaphysics) and moving up the chain it is followed by Soul, Intellect, and finally, the One or the Good, the ultimate and purely simple first principle. And Plotinus says, in his treatise “The Nature and Source of Evil,” “As necessarily as there is Something after the

First, so necessarily there is a Last: this Last is Matter, the thing which has no residue of good in it: here is the necessity of evil” (I.8.7).<sup>3</sup> And in another treatise, “if body is the cause of Evil, there can be no escape; the cause of Evil is Matter” (I.8.8). Lloyd Gerson succinctly summarizes Plotinus’s position as follows, “since the Good is one terminus of the hierarchy, evil is the other terminus and this can be nothing else but matter” (246).<sup>4</sup>

Plotinus’s interpretation of matter and its relationship to evil in Plato’s *Timaeus* is quite different from the interpretation of Vlastos and Meldrum. For Plotinus matter considered in itself is pure negation, absolute deprivation of form, so of course insofar as something is material it will fail to perfectly embody form. But why does he identify matter with pure privation? In the *Timaeus*, the “receptacle of becoming” is *space* (52b). This receptacle relates to all that comes to be by being “that *in* which they each appear to keep coming into being and *from* which they subsequently pass out of being” (50a). And elaborating on the nature of the receptacle *Timaeus* says that, “if it resembled any of the things that enter it, it could not successfully copy their opposites or things of a totally different nature whenever it were to receive them... This is why the thing that is to receive in itself all the elemental kinds must be totally devoid of any characteristics” (50e). In the *Physics*, Aristotle claims that “Plato in the *Timaeus* says that matter and space are the same” (209b10).<sup>5</sup> Plotinus accepts Aristotle’s interpretation. He says, “Matter (we read) is ‘the receptacle of becoming’ (III.6). Therefore, if space is “devoid of any characteristics,” and matter is identical to space, matter too, is “devoid of any characteristics.”

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<sup>3</sup> All translations of Plotinus are from Stephen Mackenna.

<sup>4</sup> Obviously, this does not follow. It is logically possible that there is an endless series of emanations from the first principle, but as Eyjólfur Emilsson points out, “Plotinus (and the other Neoplatonists) were convinced for reason never fully explained that the stages of the hierarchy come in discrete degrees of unity and that the number of stages is finite” (2017, 196).

<sup>5</sup> Of course, Aristotle did not agree that matter and space were the same, but this certainly is what he took Plato to be saying in the *Timaeus*.

For Plotinus, matter “is surely not what we normally call matter today, sticks and stones, molecules, atoms, quarks or what have you,” as Eyjólfur Emilsson says, “it is a strange thing, actually *not a thing at all*” (2017, 189). Space or privation is certainly not what Vlastos, Meldrum, or Broadie take matter to be in the *Timaeus*. They all take matter to be something similar to what Aristotle calls matter in the *Physics*, “the primary substratum of each thing, from which it comes to be without qualification, and which persists in the result” (192a30). Or as Emilsson puts it more simply, “what things are made of or from” (189). Yet Vlastos, Meldrum, and Broadie seem to use the term “matter” in a sense in which Aristotle might not. For Aristotle, matter is a relative term. It is whatever underlies the embodiment of a form. The wood of a tree and the wood of a table are the matter of both things. The wood that is carved from a tree into a table is what underlies the change of form from tree to table. But the primordial matter of the *Timaeus* is even more basic, it is that of which the four elements themselves are composed. According to Jonathan Lear, Aristotle thinks that “matter as such is merely potentiality: the only way it can exist is as *informed matter*” (1988, 73).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, whatever makes up the four elements is similar to the “space” of Plotinus. It has no inherent characteristics, although Aristotle chooses not to identify matter with space (*Physics* 209b22-30). But matter, in the sense in which Vlastos, Meldrum, and Broadie use it, is the particles organized by the Demiurge into the Platonic solids that compose the four elements, and these particles have definite characteristics in the *Timaeus*.

Emilsson points out that Plato never uses Plotinus’s and Aristotle’s term for matter, “*hyle*”, in the sense in which either of them uses it (2017, 188). So it is not surprising that as a self-professed expositor of Plato, Plotinus does not believe that an uncreated material substratum, that predates the formation of the cosmos, exists. For him, even the apparently basic quality of

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<sup>6</sup> See *Metaphysics* V. 1050a15, 1049b13.

magnitude or extension is received by matter from the intelligible world, and thus not an inherent property of matter. As Plotinus says, “An Ideal-Principle approaches and leads matter towards some desired dimension, investing this underlie with a magnitude from itself: Matter neither has the dimension nor acquires it; all that shows upon it of dimension derives from the Ideal-Principle” (III.6, 16). So even the appearance of an underlying physical substratum with extension in space is just one way in which the intelligible world manifests images of itself in the sensible world. But recall that before the formation of the four platonic solids which compose the four elements earth, water, air, and fire, *Timaeus* says that the elements possessed certain “traces” of what they are now. If this is taken to be matter as such, even before formation into its shapes, it had certain properties and therefore certainly could not be “devoid of any inherent characteristics” as the receptacle is. I believe that the following passage from the *Timaeus* can be used to elucidate the distinction that Plato makes between the receptacle and matter, as well as explain the reason for Plotinus’s misinterpretation.

Now as the wetnurse of becoming [the receptacle] turns watery and fiery and receives the character of earth and air, and as it acquires all the properties that come with these characters, it takes on a variety of visible aspects, but because it is filled with powers that are neither similar nor evenly balanced, no part of it shares in balance. It sways irregularly in every direction as it is shaken by those things, and being set in motion in turn shakes them. And as they are moved, they drift continually, some in one direction and others in others, separating from each other. They are winnowed out, as it were, like grain that is sifted by winnowing sieves or other such implements... This, of course, explains how these different kinds came to occupy different regions of space, even before the universe was set in order and constituted from them (*Timaeus* 52e-53a).

It is very important to understand the implications of the comparison of the receptacle to a sieve. This metaphor, I think, can help avoid an error that one is likely to make when considering the previous things to which the receptacle was compared. At 50b-e, the receptacle is likened to gold, which a smith can fashion into any shape, and the receptacle is also compared to the base of a manufactured fragrance. The receptacle is compared to these neutral bases to emphasize the fact

that it has no inherent characteristics, but takes on the characteristics of what comes to be in it. Unfortunately, the way shapes come to be in smelted gold and the way that scents come to be in a perfume are not totally analogous to the way the receptacle receives the things that come to be in it. Gold and perfume are bodies that can take on various shapes or qualities by the imposition of their forms. This is not the case with space. It is not a body. It receives all bodies. Gold embodies a statute by being sculpted into that design. A point of space takes on the characteristics of a body by that body occupying that point. The sieve becomes “grainy” by holding the grain in it, not by being shaped. And the brief description of the chaotic primordial state of things from the passage above, in which the receiver shook the elements and the elements shook it in return, emphasizes the way that space is distinct from the things that come to be in it, in a way that the shapes that come to be in gold are not distinct from the gold. Plato employs the metaphors of smelted gold and manufactured perfume to help explain the nature of the receptacle, but the latter comparison to a sieve shows that the previous comparisons, while perhaps helpful, were not completely adequate to what he wished to communicate. So Plato employed these metaphors as he began to describe the receptacle, and then switched to the metaphor of the sieve probably to articulate more precisely the nature of the thing he had in mind. But one should notice, however, that gold and the neutral base of a perfume both function in just the same way that Aristotle claims matter functions in the *Physics*. The gold and the neutral base persist despite the various forms that they take on as the underlying material of the changes. Therefore, although Plato never uses “*hyle*” as a technical term for an underlying substratum, he certainly had a notion of it. He employed it to suggest how the receptacle receives things in a similar, but not identical way. That Plato had a notion of an underlying substratum is, I think, also suggested by the following, “we shouldn’t call the mother or receptacle of what has come to be, of what is visible or perceivable in every other way, either



earth or air, fire or water, or any of their compounds or *constituents*” (51a, emphasis my own). What could these “constituents” be? Clearly, they are what compose the geometrical bodies of the four elements, and he explicitly denies that the receptacle could be any of these constituents. These constituents could only be the substratum that was organized into the bodies of the elements, which is a substance or body with few characteristics, but certainly not totally devoid of them.

For Plato, space is not matter, it is mere extension. Space plays a role in his cosmology that he admits is difficult to comprehend. He says, “It provides a fixed state for all things that come to be. It is itself apprehended by a kind of bastard reasoning that does not involve sense perception, and is hardly even an object of conviction. We look at it as in a dream when we say that everything that exists must of necessity be somewhere, in some place and occupying some space, and that which doesn’t exist somewhere, whether on earth or in heaven, doesn’t exist at all” (52b). Of course, the Demiurge, the forms, and to some extent the soul do not exist “somewhere,” because they are immaterial. And that is why material things, which must exist somewhere i.e. in space, are so often likened to mere images or dreams in many of Plato’s dialogues.<sup>7</sup>

In light of this distinction between matter and space, I will make what I take to be a reasonable speculation. Of the “three distinct things which existed even before the universe came to be,” which are “being, space, and becoming” (52d), the forms are to be identified with being, the receptacle with space, and matter with becoming. Matter is the underlying substratum that is organized into the platonic solids of which the elements consist, and the shaped matter perfectly embodies the qualities that before being shaped by the Demiurge, were present only as faint traces. In the *Timaeus*, there is what Plotinus calls “the unqualified privation of all form,” it is space. But the text does not clearly support identifying space and matter with each other, and the more

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<sup>7</sup> See, eg., *Republic* 514a-520a, *Phaedo* 109b-d, *Phaedrus* 250b-d

consistent interpretation keeps them distinct. Therefore, matter is not the cause of evil in the *Timaeus* in the way that Plotinus claims that it is, because matter is not the lowest link of the chain of being. It is not utter privation, in which the forms inevitably cannot be perfectly embodied. In the *Timaeus*, matter is between being and nonbeing. Matter is not the opposite of form; it is the ultimate substratum and is perfectly ordered by the Demiurge for its purpose of embodying form.

### 2.3 Flawed Material

Finally, Viktor Ilievski also claims that matter is recalcitrant to the designs of the Demiurge, but rather than blame an innate tendency for chaotic motion, or identify matter with space as Plotinus does, Ilievski says that matter is imperfect building material, which has certain limitations. Matter is “to such extent inherently flawed, that it inevitably transfers its imperfection onto the world” (2016, 221). He supports this claim with a compelling example from the text. Timaeus confesses that thick bone and sturdy flesh cannot be keenly responsive to sensory stimulation. And because these characteristics are exclusive of each other, when the gods made humans intelligent, they had to compromise. They created humans with thin skulls that allowed them to be intelligent, but this made them susceptible to serious injuries (75a7-c3). This suggests that the materials the gods have to work with places determinate restrictions on what is possible.

Unfortunately for Ilievski, tradeoffs like this one aren’t sufficient to explain why the gods allow evil. Why couldn’t the gods have designed a world in which the fragility of human skulls wouldn’t be a serious risk to humans? Thin skulls make it possible for some unfortunate humans to be bludgeoned to death, but that fact does not explain why some humans would become vicious enough to actually do so. Nor does the existence of thin skulls explain why the gods would include in their world earthquakes that cause buildings to collapse on these fragile skulls as well. I will show in the following sections that Plato foresees such issues and offers a different explanation.

Matter isn't directly a source of disorder and evil in this dialogue; it is simply where it occurs. It is implicated in evil's existence, but it is neither the sole nor chief cause of evil.

### 3 THE CAUSE OF EVIL

Timaeus tells us that to make the cosmos as good as possible, the Demiurge had to make it complete in every way, and this imperative necessitated the creation of human beings (30a-31d and 41b-d).<sup>8</sup> The Demiurge's wish to make the world complete forced him to place human beings in a precarious position in their relationship to each other and to the cosmos. The world-soul and the individual souls that occupy human bodies are set at odds, because they must share the finite amount of matter available for their embodiment. Human souls were made from the same constituents as the world-soul from a portion left over after its creation. Then the ancillary gods assisted the Demiurge in making humans by crafting their physical bodies (41a-e). And the matter that composes human bodies is taken from the physical cosmos (42e), the body of the cosmic god, because the Demiurge used all of the available preexistent matter in crafting the cosmos (32c-d).

Now since human bodies are a part of the cosmos, they are also moved by the rational motions of the world-soul. But because human bodies also have their own rational principles (their souls) that are distinct from the world-soul, the good of humans and the world-soul can be incidentally opposed. Nothing can be evil for the cosmic god because no bodies exist outside of its body to disturb it. Human bodies are not so fortunate. Their souls are disturbed by sensations from bodies external to them, which can corrupt their natural desire for nourishment and general well-being, causing it to degenerate into greed and other vices. These disturbances are responsible

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<sup>8</sup> One might ask why a cosmos that contains all possible beings, including those that commit and suffer evils, would be better than an incomplete cosmos without beings that commit and suffer evils. This is a question about the justification of apparent evils, and it will be addressed in the following section.

for all the evils Plato associates with mortal bodies.<sup>9</sup> And Timaeus says that a soul under the sway of these disturbances will continue to suffer “until he had dragged that massive accretion of fire-water-air-earth into conformity with the revolution of the Same and uniform within him, and so subdued that turbulent, irrational mass by means of reason” (42d). That is, by means of reason *within him*. All matter is moved by the rational world-soul as a part of its body, so all of its movements are rational. Again, there is no lingering tendency towards irrational and chaotic motion. But matter can move irrationally relative to human beings, because it can move contrary to the purposes of their distinct rational soul, while always moving according to the purposes of the world-soul.

So Gregory Vlastos is right to say that, according to the *Timaeus*, the cause of evil is disorderly motion. Yet he is wrong to conclude that matter itself is the cause of disorderly motion. The cause of disorderly motion is soul, because the only thing that moves matter, at least since the formation of the universe out of the primordial chaos, is soul (36e and 38e).<sup>10</sup> So when a human’s body is moved by another body’s soul, be it the world-soul or another human soul, in such a way that this soul cannot master the body’s motions and is instead mastered by them, it suffers evil.

Harold Cherniss suggests something similar with reference to Platonic ideas whose images in the physical world are often evils. He says that the idea of a lion is not an evil for the idea of man or vice versa. They can coexist peacefully within the divine intellect, “but the phenomenal manifestations of all these may by mutual interference in this world be evils relatively to one another” (1954, 27). Particular men and particular lions in the physical world, which are phenomenal manifestations of the ideas of lion and man, can quite obviously come into conflict

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<sup>9</sup> This is why the conflict doesn’t go both ways, so to speak. The evils that plague mortal bodies come from bodies *external* to them. But there are not bodies external to the cosmic god, they are all *internal* to it. Any motion within it is not a disturbing alien motion, it is its own natural and ordered motion (as far as it is concerned).

<sup>10</sup> See *Phaedrus* 245d

and be a threat to each other's continued existence via predation and competition. And Cherniss thinks that this is exactly the situation that the souls that animate these living bodies, and the soul that animates the cosmic body, are in. He says,

Soul of this kind [the divine world soul] in organizing phenomena moves them with a purpose perfectly good and sets them in proper motion to this end; but phenomena thus intentionally set in motion, since they are moved in a plenum of phenomenal reflections, must by their motions displace other phenomena, which in turn displace still others in directions unrelated to the intention of soul in moving the first directly (28).

I shall add that the displacement of any one phenomenon is not necessarily an evil for that phenomenon. It can be an evil only for a soul whose purposive motion is frustrated. For instance, a hurricane or an earthquake may be a motion of the cosmic body brought about by the world-soul, but the earth or water that has been displaced has not suffered any evil. These are merely parts of the cosmic body that cannot move without the world-soul. Animals or humans that suffer such a disaster, however, would be suffering an evil. The motion of the world-soul would be corrupting their own internal motions. For Plato in the *Timaeus*, "good" and "orderly" are synonymous (30b, 44b-c), as are "evil" and "disorderly" (42d, 43e). So a moving thing is in a good condition when its movements are ordered, and it is in a bad, evil, or corrupt condition when its movements are disordered. And this corruption includes external disturbances that destroy the body, as well as the disturbances of the body that in turn corrupt the soul and lead to vicious acts and desires. Thus, in the cosmos of the *Timaeus*, while there may be disorder at the local level, as in cases of vicious individuals, such disorder does not prevent the universe as a whole from being well-ordered.

Within the *Timaeus*, enlightening examples compatible with this account of evil can be found near the beginning of the dialogue, before Timaeus begins his speech, in the brief summary of the myth of Atlantis by Critias. Critias says that the person who originally recounted the myth, an Egyptian priest, said that the Greeks are like children because, unlike the Egyptians, they lack

knowledge of antiquity. The priest blames this fact on natural evils that can destroy civilizations. He says, “There have been, and there will continue to be, numerous disasters that have destroyed human life in many kinds of ways. The most serious of these involve fire and water, while the lesser ones have numerous other causes” (22c). To illustrate, he recalls the Greek myth of Phaethon, the man who lost control of the chariot of his father Helios that hauls the sun across the sky. Phaethon drove the chariot close to the surface of the earth and much of the earth was scorched and destroyed by the sun’s heat. The priest claims that this is an allegory for deviations in the motions of the heavenly bodies that have potentially disastrous effects on the earth (22d).

This naturalistic interpretation of the myth offered by the Egyptian priest is likely to be how Plato thinks natural evils occur, and it gives credence to what I think Plato believes is the cause of evil in general. These motions are the causes of disasters only when they disrupt the motions of other living things (in this instance by destroying them). If there were no living things within the cosmos, then the fires mentioned above, the floods that destroyed Atlantis, or any other destructive “disaster” would not be disastrous. There would be no living things in their way to harm. Therefore, these “disasters” are evil only when their motions (which are the perfectly good motions of the cosmos) are set at odds with other rational principles of motion, individual human or animal souls.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, it is not humans’ fault that they live on a planet that may be dangerous to them. Why Plato thinks the gods may justly allow these evils, will be considered in the following section.

The Atlantis myth also provides an example of moral evil in the war that the vicious Atlanteans, greedily seeking to expand their empire, waged against the ancient Athenians (24e).

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<sup>11</sup> I doubt that Plato thinks that plants can suffer evil. Amber Carpenter (2010) suggests that plant sensation occurs in virtue of the intelligence of the world-soul. If this is so, then it seems that though plants are ensouled, they do not have rational motions distinct from the motions of the intelligent world-soul. Thus, plants have no good distinct from contributing to the whole and so do not have an individual good that could be thwarted.

According to Plato's unfinished dialogue the *Critias*, which continues the events of the *Timaeus*, the Atlanteans were once as noble as the Athenians with whom they fought. As Critias tells us, the Atlanteans "possessed conceptions that were true and entirely lofty. And in their attitude towards disasters and chance events that constantly befall men and in their relations with one another they exhibited a combination of mildness and prudence, because, except for virtue, they held all else in disdain" (*Critias* 120e). But after many generations, "human nature gradually gained ascendancy, at that moment, in their inability to bear their great good fortune, they became disordered... inwardly they were filled with an unjust lust for possession and power" (121b). How was this fall from grace possible? The *Critias* seems to suggest that this was due in part to a degenerative bloodline. The Olympian god Poseidon was given dominion over the Isle of Atlantis and he fathered ten sons with a mortal woman named Clito (113c-d). The ten sons became the first kings of Atlantis (114a). And while they and their immediate descendants built up Atlantis into a prosperous, yet also just, empire, the latter generations brought it to ruin. Being so far removed from their divine progenitor, they were more liable to the corruptions of vice than their ancestors.

Once again, we should follow the model of the Egyptian priest, from whom this myth originated, and read the myth allegorically. This passage of the *Critias* recalls to my mind the account of the creation of human souls from the *Timaeus*. The Demiurge, after creating human souls, "mounted each soul in a carriage, as it were, and showed them the nature of the universe. He described to them the laws that had been foreordained: They would all be assigned one and the same initial birth, so that none would be less well treated by him than any other" (41e). All human souls thus begin embodiment on equal footing, because they all received this divine revelation before their birth. The first Atlanteans seem to stand in for this first generation of men. Those who were not mastered by the disturbances of the body are allowed to escape embodiment, and at death

enjoy a blissful bodiless existence among the gods. But those who could not resist their bodies' disturbances, and were corrupted and brought to viciousness, have to endure future incarnations until they are at last able to master the body with their intellects, properly order their souls, and deserve the life of the gods (42a-d).

But how is it possible for some to become corrupt? The essential element for this corruption is actually the quality of the *psychical* substance. While made out of the same constituents as that of the world-soul, the substance of individual souls is "of a second and third grade of purity" (41d). Thus, perhaps ironically given the previously considered interpretations, it is the poor quality of the soul substance and not that of matter that allows for the possibility of corruption and evil. In the case of evil, matter is moved by the world-soul, as it always is. But in this instance, the individual soul borrowing its matter from the body of the cosmic god has its own internal motion corrupted by the disturbances of its body. And it is corrupted, not because of the matter alone, but because this soul is also composed of a substance with an inherent degenerative quality that is liable to corruption.

What is this degenerative quality? When describing the creation of the world-soul, Timaeus painstakingly details how the ingredients were all mixed together in precise mathematical proportions (36a-b). Perhaps the new mixture was not so evenly mixed, and thus rather than retaining its perfectly organized mathematical ordering, Timaeus tell us that it is "of a second and third grade of purity." In the right (or perhaps wrong) circumstances, individual souls will be corrupted by the disturbances from their bodies that inevitably follow from the natural motions of the cosmos. Timaeus explicitly says that people commit evils because they are brought up poorly or because their bodies are corrupt (86d-87a). But as the passages quoted above show, both circumstances are able to corrupt souls only because of the inherent imperfection of souls.



Timaeus goes into some detail about how the body causes diseases of the soul. These diseases come in two kinds, “madness” and “ignorance” (86b). He says “When a man enjoys himself too much or, in the opposite case, when he suffers great pain... he lacks the ability to see or hear anything right. He goes raving mad and is at that moment least capable of rational thought” (86c). The soul can be driven mad by the body because the soul is an imperfect substance in imperfect conditions. Perhaps a perfect soul would be able to become and remain virtuous despite these conditions, but no such soul exists.<sup>12</sup> And thus, intense sensations can unfortunately overwhelm the rational faculties of the soul and inhibit its proper rational function. As noted above, these intense sensations can be painful or pleasurable. Therefore, it seems that both comfortable material conditions and conditions of deprivation can lead to vice. In the case of ignorance, something similar happens. Bodily desires overpower rational desires, but not by extreme experiences that disorient the rational faculty. Instead, ignorance comes about when a soul has the misfortune of inhabiting a body that is too powerful for it to control. Timaeus says that when “a large body, too much for its soul, is joined with a puny and feeble mind, then, given that human beings have two sets of natural desires—desires of the body for food and desires of the most divine part of us for wisdom—the motions of the stronger part will predominate, and amplify their own interest. They render the functions of the soul dull, stupid and forgetful” (88b). The stronger will subdue the weaker, and for some, the body is stronger than the soul. Therefore, like the madman, the ignorant individual will not be able to listen to reason.

And madmen and the ignorant will probably not be good nurturers. They may corrupt the bodies of the young through neglect or instill them with corrupt values that cultivate vice. We can see this grim fate allegorized, if we once again turn to the Atlantis myth. In the *Timaeus* and its

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<sup>12</sup> The unique case of the world-soul is a possible exception. It seems to be a perfect soul placed in perfect conditions, but it is no help to imperfect human souls.

unfinished sequel the *Critias*, we have seen that due to the imperfect conditions of human life, virtue will of course be rare and, when it is achieved, it will not be long lasting. In the story of the conflict between the Atlanteans and the Athenians, the inevitable degeneration of virtue is epitomized as well as its two proximate causes, poor upbringing and corruption of the body. The Atlanteans most obviously exemplify poor upbringing. The legacy of wealth and prosperity left by the first generation to the latter generations was a set of circumstances not fit for the formation of virtuous souls. It encouraged the desires of the Atlanteans to exceed the mean of virtue and they became greedy for power and riches, waging an unjust war upon the Athenians. The Atlanteans went mad, because they were allowed to indulge in too much pleasure. In contrast to the Atlanteans, the Athenians exemplify a proper upbringing for the cultivation of virtue. The Athenians lived under the ideal regime of Plato's *Republic* (25a), and they prove their superior virtue in this story by defeating the Atlanteans. But unfortunately, the virtuous men (and perhaps women too) of Athens are destroyed along with the Atlanteans by the earthquake and subsequent flood that sank Atlantis into the sea. The rest of the citizens of Athens, without their virtuous rulers, were unable to maintain their just state. Thus, the Egyptian priest considers his contemporaneous Athenians to be like children. They are much less developed in virtue than their progenitors. Yet this is due to no fault of their own. The Athenians were deprived of their virtuous rulers and forced to contend with the difficult conditions of being survivors of a cataclysmic natural disaster. Great material deprivation can lead to corrupt bodies and souls just as too much comfort can. This element of chance is why virtue is not the norm. One could be unfortunate enough to have had a poor upbringing, or a chance occurrence could drive one mad. This sort of corruption, displacement, and disorder is an inevitable side-effect of motion in the plenum that is the physical cosmos, as noted by Cherniss above.

#### 4 EVIL'S JUSTIFICATION

So far, I've considered the causes of evil in the world, i.e., *how* Plato thinks evil comes about. But even with a good explanation for how evil occurs, it does not follow that the existence of evil is *justified*. Why couldn't the world have been set up so that no evil occurs? And even if it is inevitable that the created world could not be perfect, we can ask, why was it better for God to create a world plagued by evils rather than no world at all? Any theism that acknowledges the existence of evil as a problem needs to show why the seemingly imperfect world is the best it could be, and why an imperfect world is better than no world at all.<sup>13</sup> Hence, theists of this kind need theodicy.

How does Plato answer this challenge? To be truly good, the cosmos must be complete, and this means realizing the "Principle of Plenitude." The existence of all possible kinds of beings must be realized in the physical cosmos. And some scholars also claim that, to justify the evil concomitant with the realization of this principle and to avoid blaming the gods for evil, Plato offers a theodicy that anticipates what has come to be known as the "freewill defense." This view has some plausibility, but ultimately, I do not think that Plato offers this kind of theodicy. Instead, I will suggest two alternative interpretations. I call these the "pessimistic theodicy" and the "optimistic theodicy." The former takes the Demiurge to prioritize the good of the universe at the expense of individual souls, while the latter suggests that the Demiurge makes both the cosmos as a whole and the fate of individual souls as good as possible. I think that the latter is more likely to be Plato's position.

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<sup>13</sup> Some traditions, like Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism, posit two equally matched divine powers, one evil and the other good. There is no "problem" of evil for these traditions, because there is no supremely good and powerful being that seems to paradoxically allow it. Evil is just as primal and as powerful as the good in these traditions.

#### 4.1 The Principle of Plentitude

When Timaeus begins the main part of his speech, he asks, “Now why did he who framed this whole universe of becoming frame it?” (29e). He then gives the straightforward answer that because the Demiurge is supremely good and totally free of jealousy, he wanted everything to be as much like himself as possible. Therefore, the Demiurge, by virtue of his own goodness, simply had to arrange the primordial chaos into the well-ordered universe (29e-30b). Notice that the Demiurge does not create *ex nihilo*. Matter coexists eternally with God. If it is left unattended by the power and goodwill of the Demiurge, then it is disordered chaos. This is something that the good Demiurge would never allow to endure, because order is better than disorder (30b). And according to the *Timaeus*, a universe in which only the Demiurge and the cosmic god existed would not be better than one that also includes finite beings within the cosmos who commit and suffer evil, because to be as good as possible the cosmos must be complete (30c-31a). And this means that all the possible kinds of beings must be actualized in the world of becoming, the physical cosmos. This would later be called by Arthur Lovejoy the “Principle of Plentitude” (1971, 52).

One might object that completeness is not necessary for goodness, and perhaps suggest that the evils in the cosmos concomitant with the supposed necessity of completeness belies its claim to goodness. But as A. E. Taylor points out, “Plato does not commit himself to any statement about the *amount* of evil in the world, beyond the one contention that, being the work of an all-good God, the world as a whole must be good, i.e. the evil in it must be subordinate to the good” (1928, 78). Plato does not deny that the Principle of Plentitude brings evil into the world, but he can quite consistently insist that despite this fact the world is better for actualizing this principle. Lacking completeness seems to imply some degree of disorder, and we know that for Plato order is superior

to disorder. And unfortunately, there is no way for God to set up the world so that evil does not exist. The Demiurge does not create *ex nihilo* and he is not omnipotent like the God of the Abrahamic traditions. Being perfectly good, he sought to make the world as much like himself as possible, but he cannot make the world exactly like himself. As Taylor elaborates, “since the world *is* not God, but something derived from and dependent on God, it cannot be as good as God Himself. If it were, there would be no distinction between God and the world; the world would just be God over again” (1928, 78). The fact that the Demiurge wishes to make the world as much like himself as possible clearly requires the universe to be distinct from Him. So although the cosmos is a god according to the *Timaeus*, we can agree with Taylor that, “Plato is no Pantheist.” In the *Timaeus* the world is a god, but the supreme Demiurge, the ancillary gods, and mortals, are distinct individual beings.

The aforementioned limitation on the power of the Demiurge might seem to be sufficient for Plato’s theodicy. God is supremely good and powerful, but it is not logically possible for God to create anything equal to himself, because if he could then he would not be the supreme being. Eliminating all evil from creation may be beyond God’s power, but this fact alone does not absolve God of blame for the evil in the universe. It needs to be demonstrated that the gods are either not responsible for evil or that they are not blameworthy because they use evils for a greater good. It has yet to be shown why the ordered cosmos with all its evils is better than the primordial chaos. Yes, chaos is disordered, and perhaps order is better than disorder, but is the order of the cosmos worth the price of the mortals that suffer within it? Why is the latter the best possible (though not supremely perfect) state of affairs?

## 4.2 The Proto-freewill Defense?

Both Sarah Broadie and Viktor Ilievski think that Plato's gods are absolved from blame for evils by giving mortal beings full responsibility for their actions. Broadie claims that for Plato, "immortal souls are individual centres of responsibility" (2008, 15). And Ilievski, largely in agreement, says, "Plato in the *Timaeus* affirms the all-benevolent nature of his deity and delegates the responsibility for the badness that living beings experience to the individual agents. He thus sets firm foundations for what will become known as the Free-will defense of God's goodness" (2016, 215). Briefly summarized, the freewill defense runs as follows: God, wanting to make the world as good as possible, wished to give humans greater goods than mere sensual pleasure and the absence of pain. These goods included moral responsibility and freedom of the will. But it is not logically possible (and therefore beyond even an omnipotent God's power) to give humans freewill without allowing for the possibility that it will be abused; therefore, God must permit the existence of some evil in order to give to humans the great good of freewill and the moral responsibility that it entails. This good is worth the suffering and evil that it may cause, so God is right to grant it to humans, and it shifts full responsibility to humans for evil because they are the ones who choose to commit these evils and not God (Swinburne 1996, 143-170).

Now, Plato's Demiurge is not omnipotent, and he nowhere articulates a conception of freewill as understood by Christian philosophers who offer a freewill defense, like Richard Swinburne or Augustine.<sup>14</sup> Yet Ilievski is right to acknowledge the similar consequences of his interpretation of Plato's theodicy. Although Broadie does not explicitly say that on her interpretation Plato anticipates the freewill defense, the similarity of her view to Ilievski's clearly warrants the comparison. Both point out that at the moment of their creation, all souls are briefed

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<sup>14</sup> See Augustine, *The Free Choice of the Will* II 2.3.

by the Demiurge about the nature of the universe and their own true nature as divine and immortal souls. If these souls remember this revelation and are not mastered by their bodily desires, they will live life happily, and at the appropriate time return to the heavenly divinity which was assigned to them as a guide and escape the perils of embodiment for a truly happy existence (41e-42d).<sup>15</sup> The Demiurge now cannot be blamed for the moral evils humans commit. Their immortal souls were all briefed by their creator as to their true nature and the true nature of the universe. They know exactly how they must act to perfect themselves and live the best lives possible. God made sure they knew this. If they fail to be just, and give in to their selfish desires, they will be reincarnated as supposedly lesser forms of life, first as a woman,<sup>16</sup> then as irrational animals, until the natural rhythms of the soul are at last able to rule the irrational parts again, and they can escape the cycle of rebirth (91a-92b). And the soul's fate is entirely its own responsibility, because God gave it the best possible start, a start that allowed it the possibility of avoiding lowly incarnations altogether.

Unfortunately for both Broadie and Ilievski, Plato clearly insists that people sin only from ignorance, and therefore are not ultimately responsible for their actions. Timaeus says,

for no one is willingly evil. A man becomes evil, rather, as a result of one or another corrupt condition of his body and an uneducated upbringing. No one who incurs these pernicious conditions would will to have them... that is how all of us who are bad come to be that way—the products of two causes entirely beyond our control. It is the begetters far more than the begotten, and the nurturers far more than the nurtured, that bear the blame for this (86d-87a).

Thus, a person is not morally responsible for becoming evil. We become that way either because we were brought up poorly, or our corrupted bodies overwhelmed our rational faculties. And again, both of these circumstances are “causes entirely beyond our control.” One might object that while this may be the case for later generations of humans, the first generation was in a different situation.

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<sup>15</sup> Broadie (2011 pp. 13-14) Ilievski (2016 pp. 211-215).

<sup>16</sup> Displaying a disappointing misogynistic bias.

The first humans were raised by the best of nurturers, the Demiurge himself, who revealed to them their true divine nature and the nature of the universe. So perhaps the Demiurge and the ancillary gods can't be blamed for the corruption of those who later turned to vice, because everyone got a fair start and not all were corrupted. While later incarnations of corrupted souls may no longer remember the revelation from the Demiurge, they seem to be responsible for getting started on their ill-chosen path. The gods gave them the best possible start, and these souls chose vice over virtue. But this considers only one of the possible sources of corruption, poor upbringing.

In the case of the first generation of humans, upbringing was not the source of corruption, it was a corruption of the body. Recall the various ways Timaeus says that disturbances from bodily sensations and desires can overwhelm the soul (43a-d). Of course, as I've shown above, it is not the mere materiality of the body that corrupts the soul. The lack of self-sufficiency of mortal bodies is what allows for the corruption of human souls, which are made of a low-grade and corruptible substance. Since the souls of the first generation of humans all were treated equally by the Demiurge, we can assume that they were all equally virtuous. All were made of the same substance, and all received the same divine revelation. Therefore, only chance could have determined which souls became corrupt and which did not. Some were thrown into circumstances that would corrupt them, and some were not. And the corruption was inevitable, because no one is willingly is evil for evil's sake. So while the Demiurge did not force anyone to commit evil deeds or fail to give them a good upbringing, some souls were abandoned to a state of affairs which would inevitably corrupt them. Their very constitution, given to them by the gods, made it inevitable. The gods may not be the direct cause of the corruption of any particular human, but they did knowingly create a world in which they knew some humans would inevitably become vicious, and this makes them more responsible for evil than humans who sin through ignorance.



### 4.3 Rehabilitation Through Reincarnation

If Plato does think that the gods are willing and able to make everything as good as possible, then everything in the cosmos must be as good as possible. But how can this be? I think that Plato has two options. One option would be to insist that the realization of the Principle of Plenitude is such a great good that it is worth the existence of evil. Again, as Taylor reminds us, “Plato does not commit himself to any statement about the *amount* of evil in the world,” (1928, 78). It could be the case that even with the natural and moral evils that will be suffered by mortal beings, it is better to make the universe complete than leave it incomplete.

This seems to be the theodicy of Plato’s *Laws*. The Athenian stranger responds with not very comforting words to the hypothetical atheist who objects to the gods’ existence because of the existence of evil. He says, “you perverse fellow, one such part—a mere speck that nevertheless constantly contributes to the good of the whole—is you, you who have forgotten that nothing is created except to provide the entire universe with a life of prosperity. You forget that creation is not for your benefit: *you* exist for the sake of the universe” (903c). Here Plato seems to admit that it is of course not good for mortals to suffer pain caused by natural disasters or diseases, to suffer evil at the hands of vicious individuals, or to become morally vicious themselves. Nevertheless, this all contributes to the greater good of making an excellent universe. Thus, although the Demiurge may be good, he is not philanthropic. Humans are merely his tools for making a good universe and, being lower than the gods on the hierarchy of being, it is not wrong to treat humans with appropriately diminished concern. I call this the *pessimistic theodicy*.<sup>17</sup>

The pessimistic theodicy appears to be compatible with the afterlife myth of the *Timaeus*. At 42c, Timaeus says that a man who fails to live a good life is born as a woman, and if this soul

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<sup>17</sup> Julia Annas gives a similar interpretation of Plato’s myth of Er, but she dismisses the cosmology of the *Timaeus* (I think unfairly) as “shallowly Providential” (1982, 139).

still cannot live justly it will be reincarnated as a wild animal whose character resembles the character of the soul. And souls who are condemned to be reincarnated in nonrational animals seem to get what they wish for, living exaggerated versions of the lives they sought to live while in human bodies. Men who are morally good but not perfectly wise are reincarnated as birds, more foolish men who ignore higher pursuits for worldly things become terrestrial animals, while those who are stupidest and most vicious of all are condemned to be marine animals, living as far from the heavens as possible (91e-92b). We must not fail to notice that it is only because some humans fail to be virtuous, and are thus reincarnated into lower animals, that the cosmos is complete.<sup>18</sup> The lower animals, whose embodied existence is also required by the Principle of Plenitude, only come to be by the corruption of human souls. These bodies are created for these souls only when they die as corrupt individuals, and not before. The Demiurge did not create any souls uniquely for the bodies of non-human animals. A soul that occupies a human body and a soul at home in the body of a scorpion were both made of the same substance left over from the making of the world soul, and both souls began existence in human bodies even though one eventually succumbed to vice. And so it is only by the degeneration of some souls into viciousness, that the Principle of Plenitude is realized and the great good of an ordered and complete cosmos is achieved by the Demiurge. The corruption of some humans was inevitable, because of the limitations of mortal bodies, the corruptibility of their souls, and the limitations of a god who is not omnipotent. And this inevitable evil was subordinated to the good intentions of the Demiurge by his exploitation of it for achieving the greater good of a complete and well-ordered cosmos.

The pessimistic theodicy is a viable interpretation, but I think further analysis suggests that the other option, which I call the *optimistic theodicy*, is more likely to be Plato's view, at least in

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<sup>18</sup> See Ilievski (2016, 212, fn 44).

the *Timaeus*. Contrary to the theodicy of the *Laws*, I think that in the *Timaeus* Plato may claim that the gods make the best of the precarious situation in which they must place human beings by offering them the chance for redemption through a cycle of reincarnation that functions as a rehabilitative punishment. This mechanism of justice is why, despite the evils that finite mortal beings are subjected to, the gods have in fact made everything as good as possible for both the universe as a whole *and* individual souls.

In the *Timaeus*, vicious deeds in a previous life warrant successive reincarnations in supposedly lower forms of life. Wicked souls aren't reincarnated in lesser beings just to give them what they deserve, however, but to improve them. Rehabilitative punishment is a recurring theme in Plato's dialogues. The *Gorgias* states this theory of punishment explicitly, "It is appropriate for everyone who is subject to punishment rightly inflicted by another either to become better and profit from it, or else be made an example to others" (525b).<sup>19</sup> But is there any reason to assume that a rehabilitative theory of punishment is also present in the *Timaeus*? I think so. Its unfinished sequel, the *Critias*, explicitly endorses rehabilitative punishment. Critias says that after the corruption of the Atlanteans "Zeus, god of the gods, reigning as king according to law, could clearly see this state of affairs, he observed this noble race lying in this abject state and resolved to punish them and to make them more harmonious as a result of their chastisement" (121c). And I think that in the *Timaeus* itself, there is enough evidence to suggest that in this dialogue it is likely that Plato has rehabilitative punishment in mind. The moral psychology of the *Timaeus* is consistent with the other dialogues that endorse rehabilitative punishment,<sup>20</sup> and the cycle of reincarnation is clearly ordered to a soteriological telos, a blissful life with the gods and freedom from the perils of embodiment (at least for a time before reincarnation). And if we read the passage

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<sup>19</sup> See *Republic* 335d-e

<sup>20</sup> See *Meno* 77c-78b, *Republic* 589c, *Apology* 37a

about Zeus and the Atlanteans from the *Critias* allegorically, which Plato implores us to do (as I think I've shown in the previous sections), it is clear that Zeus represents the Demiurge who crafts a universe designed to redeem corrupted souls.

At the conclusion of his account of the reincarnation myth, Timaeus clearly suggests that living as a beast without rational capacities is intended to repair the corruption of vicious souls. He says, "These, then, are the conditions that govern, both then and now, how all the animals exchange their forms, one for the other, and in the process lose or gain intelligence or folly" (92c). If souls can gain intelligence, it must be from the harsh lessons they learned during their various embodiments. This rehabilitative theory of punishment is compatible with the lack of responsibility souls have in the *Timaeus*, because then it doesn't matter to what degree souls are responsible for their condition. As long as the punishments have the goal of improving them, the gods are not guilty of condemning souls to a hopeless fate, but instead are ordering the universe for their redemption. The ultimate reward for these just souls is escape from the cycle of rebirth, for Timaeus claims that, "if a person lived a good life throughout the due course of time, he would at the end return to his dwelling place in his companion star, to live a life of happiness that agreed with his character" (42b). This is how the Demiurge and the ancillary gods make not just the natural universe, but everything, as good as it can possibly be.

Yet the reincarnation myth of the *Timaeus* is far from a complete account of the fate of souls after their deaths. It is no more than a general outline, and it leaves the reader with many questions about specifics and details. By what criteria do the gods judge the character of souls? And which gods are the judges? These are left unanswered. And the answer to what I think is an especially important question is ambiguous, do righteous souls get to permanently escape the cycle of rebirth? At first glance, if even the righteous must eventually be reincarnated and risk corruption

again, it is hard to see how this is the best possible state of affairs. Why not let them just enjoy bliss eternally? The following passage suggests that they might, “And when this conformity is complete, we shall have achieved our goal: that most excellent life offered to humankind by the gods, both now and forevermore” (90d). Yet it is unclear if the disembodied life achieved by righteous souls continues forever, or whether it just is the best life that will ever be available to these souls, but still not eternal. Broadie, among others, doubts that the escape is eternal.<sup>21</sup> The necessity of the completeness of the cosmos seems to demand that not all souls could escape embodiment permanently, because living corporeal human beings (as well as the nonrational animals) are necessary for the cosmos to be complete. And for Plato in the *Timaeus*, this is necessary for the entire state of things to be as good as possible. Therefore, I doubt that escape from the cycle of reincarnation is permanent.

But the question that seems most important to my purposes here is, how exactly are souls rehabilitated by their future incarnations? If a soul is embodied in a nonrational animal, how does it become conscious of its past mistakes from this punishment? It seems incapable of rational reflection. A similar problem would also occur if the soul received another human body, because it cannot remember its past lives.<sup>22</sup> The *Timaeus* does not give obvious answers to these questions. The intention of Timaeus in his speech is not to give a complete account of the fate of our souls. His goal is scientific, and he sets out to explain his cosmology. When speaking of human beings, he has much more to say about the reasons the gods designed the human body as they did, than he has to say about the nature of the soul (69d-76e). It should come as no surprise then, that Timaeus does not offer an explicitly communicated and complete account of the afterlife or his theodicy.

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<sup>21</sup> Broadie, (2008, 16), Mason (1994, 93), and Robinson (1990, 107)

<sup>22</sup> Plato’s view of the immortality of the soul is perhaps compatible with memories of former lives, but in the *Timaeus* it seems to be taken for granted that no one remembers their previous lives.

Achieving certain answers to these questions is probably impossible, so one must be content with speculation within reasonable bounds. I think that through a suggestive hint at the beginning of the *Timaeus* as the stage is being set for Timaeus's speech, Plato gives the reader permission to complete the outline offered in the *Timaeus* with the details offered by the myth of Er in his *Republic*. In this section of the *Timaeus* we learn that the events in the dialogue immediately follow up on those of the *Republic* (*Timaeus*, 17b-c). Clearly Plato wants the reader to keep the *Republic* in mind. This is as close to explicit permission to use one dialogue to interpret another that the dialogue form can offer. Aware that such questions might come to the minds of his readers, Plato tells us where to look for the answers through his usual protagonist Socrates.

In the myth of Er, souls are given the chance to move on to better lives by a choice that is informed by their previous life and what they discover during a stint in the underworld on their way to the next incarnation. The gods reward righteous souls with the opportunity to choose among the available future lives first, before wicked souls. Yet souls who have returned to the underworld from wicked incarnations are actually the best at choosing better lives for themselves, having learned from suffering in their previous incarnation, while souls returning from blessed lives in heaven tend to make poorer choices. As Socrates says, "most of those who were caught out in this way were souls who had come down from heaven and who were untrained in suffering as a result. The majority of those who had come up from the earth, on the other hand, having suffered themselves and seen others suffer, were in no rush to make their choices" (619e). This statement is obviously consistent with Plato's understanding of rehabilitative punishment in the *Timaeus*. Good fortune and a life of ease can be corrupting, while suffering can remind one of the importance of virtue. And in one memorable anecdote, it is suggested how the soul of even a nonrational animal can improve its character.

In Socrates' account of the underworld, we are told about a soul who just previously lived as a swan. This swan soul chooses for its next reincarnation a human life (*Republic*, 620a). It is not explained how the swan is able to make this apparently rational decision, but clearly it shows that Plato thinks, here in the underworld, it is capable of rational deliberation. Perhaps because the soul is no longer embodied, it is free of the disturbing influence of its body on its rational faculty.<sup>23</sup> Of course its ability to think rationally is influenced by its acquired character, as those souls who make poor choices for their next lives remind us. But a soul that has just come from the relatively ordered existence of a good life as a swan (to whatever extent this is possible for a nonrational animal), when freed from its body perhaps it is able to use its rational faculty more effectively than it did during embodiment. Thus, by looking back on its previous life as a swan, it is able to see that it has the opportunity for a more rational and overall superior earthly existence as a human, and perhaps eventually a heavenly life among the gods. Choosing this superior mortal life, the soul reveals its improved character.

Will this prudent swan soul eventually escape the cycle of rebirth forever, provided that it lives wisely and justly in its future human life? If this soul becomes truly wise, it may at least get to avoid lowly reincarnations. Socrates says, "if someone pursues philosophy in a sound manner when he comes to live here on earth and if the lottery doesn't make him one of the last to choose, then, given what Er has reported about the next world, it looks as though not only will he be happy here, but his journey from here to there and back again won't be along the rough underground path, but along the smooth heavenly one" (619e). Although permanent escape may not be possible, one can with good confidence expect to be continually reborn into good lives, as long as one is lucky enough to avoid a bad lot in the lottery for the order of choosing the next life. It takes no

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<sup>23</sup> See *Timaeus* 43a-c

stretch of the imagination to see how something analogous is likely the case in the *Timaeus*. Truly philosophical souls can expect to be born into good lives, but fortune may condemn one to suffer certain disasters or poor nurturers that may corrupt even the purest of souls. And I think that it is likely that Plato believes that some corruption is necessary for the realization of the Principle of Plentitude.

The journey of souls in the underworld, the various gods and goddesses that guide and judge humans along this journey, and all the other fantastical details of this myth do not all seem compatible with the story in the *Timaeus*, which is far more scientific and far less mythological. But these apparent inconsistencies need not be too troubling, and we should not be surprised by them. Perhaps we should expect inconsistencies since Plato does not write in his own voice. The afterlife myths of the *Timaeus* and the *Republic* are placed in the mouths of two very different speakers in two very different contexts. But by comparing Plato's thought in these different moods, I think we can at least come close to discovering what the man himself thought

## 5 CONCLUSION

When interpreting the *Timaeus* for Plato's theodicy, we must be satisfied with some ambiguity, however, we can be sure that matter is not the cause of evil. The power of the Demiurge is limited by other factors, like the necessary imperfection of all created things, and the constraints of realizing the Principle of Plentitude. Yet the limited power of the Demiurge is not sufficient to explain why the universe could not have been set up in a different way without any evil. There seem to be two ways we can take Plato's God to justify the existence of evil. Perhaps the Demiurge is good, but not philanthropic. The misery of a few measly humans may be well worth the overall good of the universe as a whole, and so it is no injustice to allow humans to suffer for this greater purpose. Or, if the providence of Plato's God extends even to individuals, we may interpret the



cycle of reincarnation as having been ordered for the rehabilitation of vicious souls. Thus, the suffering of individuals as they move through the cycle of rebirth is also intended for their benefit. Plato seems to prefer the more pessimistic theodicy in the *Laws*, and it is a viable interpretation of the *Timaeus*, but I think Plato's sympathy for rehabilitative punishment suggests that in the *Timaeus* he entertains a more hopeful vision of the cosmos.

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