

The Mixing of the soul in the *Timaeus*

Plato's *Timaeus* centres upon the act of creation – the bringing into existence the manifested universe. It arises, he says, from a timeless contemplation by an eternal intellect – in the dialogue named as the Demiurge – of an eternal paradigm, the *autozōon* translated variously as *The Living Being* or *Animal Itself*. The entire exposition of this by the main speaker, Timaeus, is presented as “likely myth” or “a story of likeness” – so not a technical description such as modern physics attempts to provide.

There are, however, important affirmations which should be picked out as metaphysical foundations upon which the “likely myth” will rest upon. These are:

Firstly, that pure contemplative intellect gives rise to the Cosmos, and so causally speaking there is a sequence – first, there is an overarching Good (because both the contemplating Intellect, and the contemplated Intelligible paradigm share a characteristic of goodness); then there is the contemplated being, then a contemplating intellect, then a resultant Cosmos. But we should not consider these as a temporal sequence – if only because according to Timaeus, time was born *with* the Cosmos. In other words, “before” the cosmos existed, there was no time and therefore no *before* or *after*. The words of the dialogue, as Timaeus explores the consequences of the paradigm of the Cosmos, *animal itself*, being eternal, are:

37d

The nature indeed of the animal its paradigm is eternal, and this it is impossible to adapt perfectly to a generated effect. Hence he determined by a dianoëtic energy¹ to produce a certain movable image of eternity: and thus, while he was adorning and distributing the universe, he *at the same time* formed an eternal image flowing according to number, of eternity abiding in one; and which receives from us the appellation of time....

But time was generated together with the universe, that being produced together they might together be dissolved, if any dissolution should ever happen to these. And time was generated according to the exemplar of an eternal nature, that this world might be the most similar possible to such a nature. For its exemplar is permanent being, through the whole of eternity; but the universe alone was generated, is, and will be, through the whole of time.

38b

For Plato, then, creation is not an act in time: as soon as intellect contemplates, there is the Cosmos.

Secondly, soul is intrinsic to a good and happy Cosmos, since soul is a life-giving principle and the Cosmos, being created as an image of the paradigm, *animal itself*, needs something to endow it with life. Further, a Cosmos which is intelligent is better than an unintelligent one, and because the Demiurge's will to bring about the best Cosmos is authoritative, he ensures the body of the Cosmos is pervaded by soul. Timaeus says:

¹ By “dianoetic energy” he means a reasoning process: but how can an eternal intellect, above time, go through a reasoning process, a sequence in time? It is clear that Plato is using this to indicate that although the Demiurge is primarily thinking one eternal unchanging thought, what emerges from the one pure thought, is a universe which unfolds in a never-ending sequence, all the inherent possibilities of the eternal and single paradigm.

In consequence of a reasoning process, therefore, he found that among the things naturally visible² there was nothing, the whole of which, if void of intelligence, could ever become more beautiful than the whole of that which is endued with intellect: and at the same time he discovered, that it was impossible for intellect to accede to any [manifested] being, without the intervention of soul. Hence, as the result of this reasoning, placing intellect in soul and soul in body, he fabricated the universe; that thus it might be a work naturally the most beautiful and the best. In this manner, therefore, according to an assimilative reason,³ it is necessary to call the world an animal, endued with intellect, and generated through the providence of Divinity. 30b

Thirdly, soul is causally before body, and not a production arising from body. The words of Timaeus are:

But indeed the artificer did not produce soul, as we just now began to say, junior to body: for he who conjoined these would never permit that the more [causally] ancient nature should be subservient to the younger. But we, as being much conversant with that which casually occurs, assert things of this kind in an assimilative way; while, on the contrary, the artificer of the world constituted soul both in generation and virtue prior to, and more ancient than, body, as being the proper lord and ruler of its servile nature; and that in the following manner. 34c

It is here that the substance of our discussion is given – albeit in Timaeus’ story-like form. Timaeus continues:

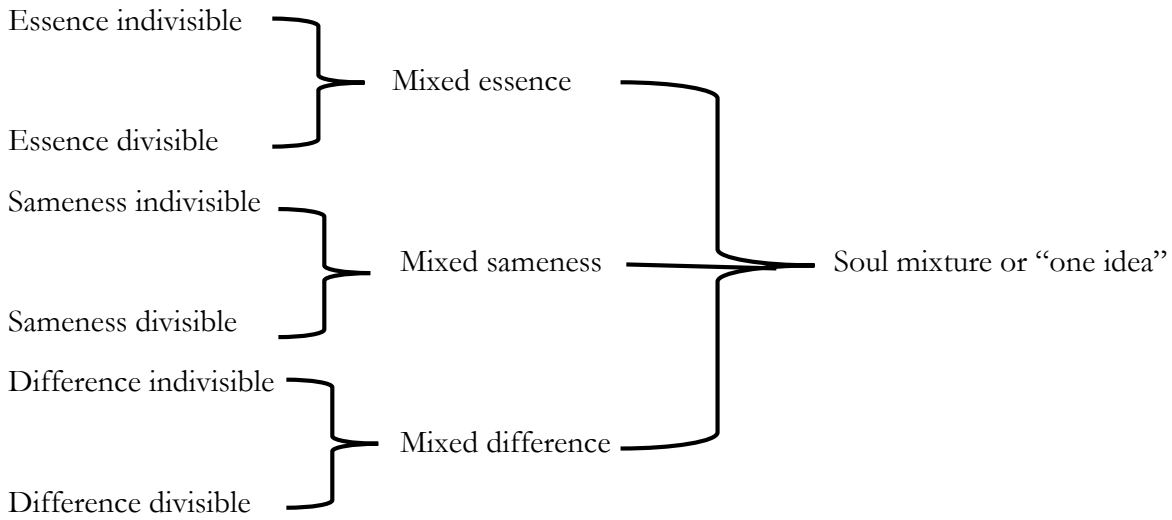
From an essence indivisible, and always subsisting according to sameness of being, and from a nature divisible about bodies, he mingled from both a third form of essence, having a middle subsistence between the two. And again, between that which is impartible and that which is divisible about bodies, he placed the nature of *same* and *different*. And taking these, now they are three, he mingled them all into one idea. But as the nature of *different* could not without difficulty be mingled in *same*, he harmonized them together by employing force in their conjunction. But after he had mingled these two with essence, and had produced one from the three, he again divided this whole into becoming parts; at the same time mingling each part from *same*, *different*, and *essence*. 35a
35b

The mixing takes place in a krater – a large bowl in which it was usual amongst the Greeks to mix water and wine in various traditional ratios (depending under what circumstances the mixture was to be used). In the Commentaries on the Timaeus, it was said that the krater was, theologically speaking, Hera – meaning that the soul was born from the womb of the Goddess, the spouse of Zeus the Demiurge.

² That is, intelligibles: for that these are visible is evident from the words of Plato further on [39e], where he says - "Whatever ideas intellect perceived in animal itself," etc. But that these are *naturally* visible will be evident, as Proclus beautifully observes, if we consider that some things are visible to us, and others according to nature. And the things, indeed, which are visible to us, are in their own nature dark and obscure; but things naturally visible are truly known, and are resplendent with divine light. And such are intelligibles.

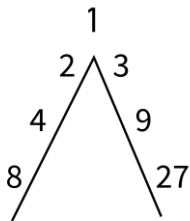
³ By “assimilative reason” here Plato means an *approximate human account* of the relationship of soul to body.

We can show this series of mixings in this way:



The word translated as *essence* is *ousia* – sometimes translated as *being*; while the words for sameness and difference can also be translated as *identity* and *other*. Within this mixture the Demiurge introduces ratios which produce musical intervals, so that the whole soul has an internal harmony:

But he began to divide as follows: In the first place, he received one part from the whole. 35b



Then he separated a second part, double of the first; afterwards a third, sesquialter of the second, but triple of the first: then a fourth, double of the second; in the next place a fifth, triple of the third; a sixth, octuple of the first; and lastly a seventh, twenty-seven times more than the first. After this, 35c

he filled up the double and triple intervals, again cutting off parts from the whole; and placed them so between the intervals, that there might be two mediums in every interval.... 36a

The two mediums are the harmonic and the arithmetic means, which eventually produce the following series:

1 $\frac{4}{3}$ $\frac{3}{2}$ 2 $\frac{8}{3}$ 3 4 $\frac{9}{2}$ $\frac{16}{3}$ 6 8 9 $\frac{27}{2}$ 18 27

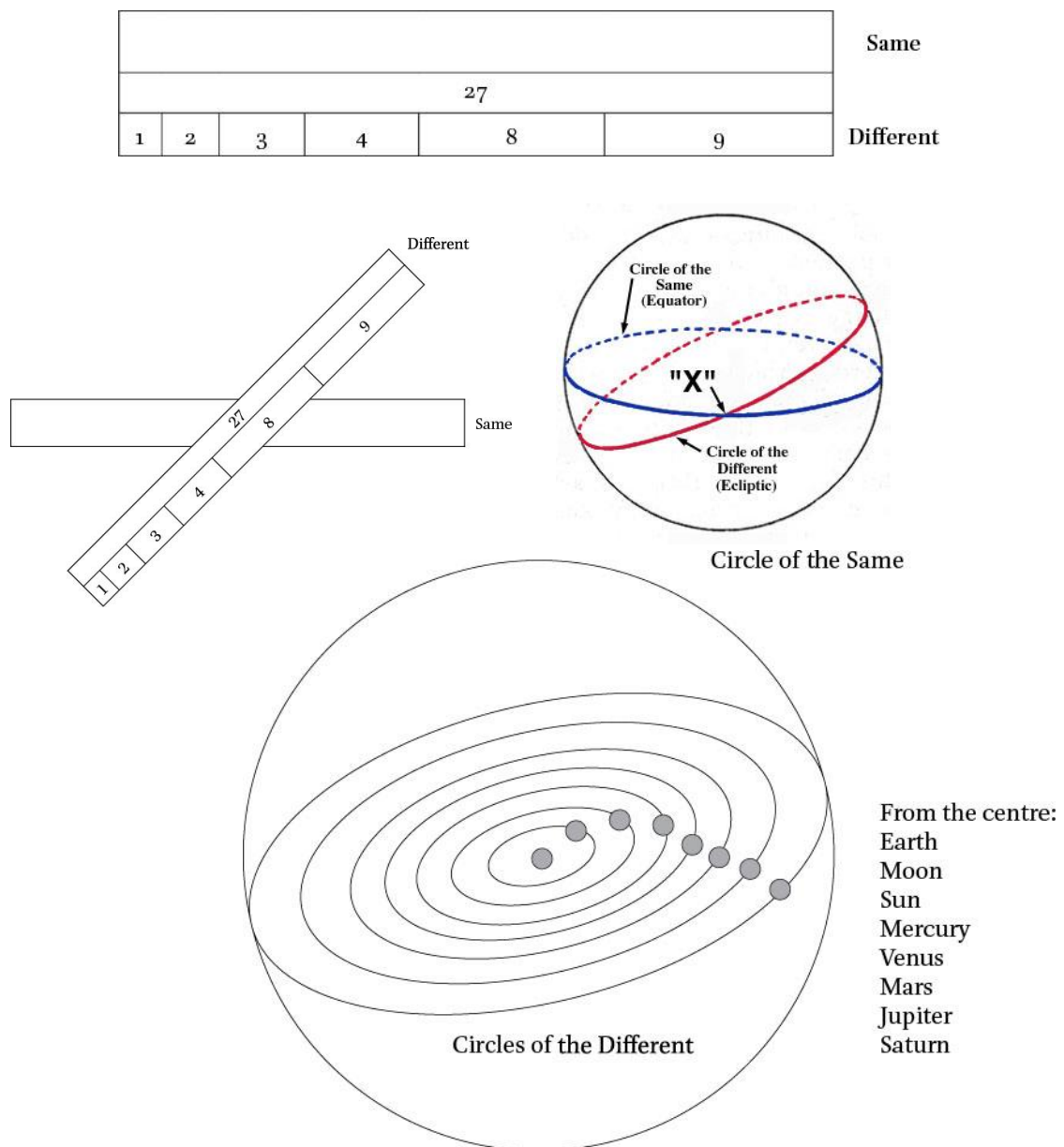


All of this can be seen as giving the soul several characteristics – it is a unity, because the different elements are mingled into one idea; there is a shadow of both a duality, because half the mixture is from indivisible stuff, and half from divisible stuff; it also has a shadow of triplicity because of the underlying presence of essence, sameness and difference; it has harmony because of the way the Demiurge made a new division according to musical ratios.

We should be aware that this whole section of the dialogue is actually describing the creation of the world soul (i.e. the soul of the whole Cosmos). Later on he will come to talk about the creation

of individual souls, required in order to populate the universe as it unfolds from universal to particular. There are a number of details that Timaeus adds to this picture of the world soul before he moves on to individual souls.

The whole mixture is laid out as a strip of material, which is then cut lengthways into two halves, which are then formed into the letter chi X and then drawn round into two circles, which are set in motion in opposite directions at an oblique angle to each other. Plato is now moving the image away from the musical scale and towards one of the heavens, as seen from earth. The circle of the same is the circle of the fixed stars which seem to be moving together without wandering from their orbit in one direction and in the far distance; the circle of the different, being cut by six sections thereby make a series of seven orbits in which the planets (literally “wanderers”), each allowing the seven visible bodies of the solar system to move at different speeds through their separate orbits in a direction opposite to the movement of the fixed stars.



The whole figure is set in motion, which, says Timaeus, “gave rise to the divine beginning of an unceasing and wise life, through the whole of time.” Being composed of the mixture, the Cosmic

soul is able to know and to judge both essences that are indivisible (that is, those that belong to the realm of eternity) and those that are divisible (that is, that belong to the order of time).

The Demiurge, having set the universal movements in place, then speaks to the “junior Gods” – those that are to rule over the particular forms and elements of the manifested universe, and who are, therefore, going to deal with matters of temporal beginnings and endings. He instructs by saying:

“Learn, therefore, what I now say to you indicating my desire. Three genera of mortals yet remain to be produced.⁴ Without the generation of these, therefore, the universe will be imperfect; for it will not contain every kind of animal in its spacious extent. But it ought to contain them, that it may become sufficiently perfect. Yet if these are generated, and participate of life through me, they will become equal to the Gods. 41b
41c

That mortal natures, therefore, may subsist, and that the universe may be truly all, convert yourselves, according to your nature, to the fabrication of animals, imitating the power which I employed in your generation. And whatever among these is of such a nature as to deserve the same appellation with immortals, which obtains sovereignty in these, and willingly pursues justice, and reverences you - of this I myself will deliver the seed and beginning: it is your business to accomplish the rest; to weave together the mortal and immortal nature; by this means fabricating and generating animals, causing them to increase by supplying them with nourishment, and receiving them back again when dissolved by corruption.” 41d

Thus spoke the demiurgus; and again into the same krater, in which mingling he had tempered the soul of the universe, he poured mingling the remainder of the former mixture: in a certain respect indeed after the same manner, yet not similarly incorruptible according to the same, but deficient from the first in a second and third degree. And having thus composed the universe, he distributed souls equal in number to the stars, inserting each in each: and causing them to ascend as into a vehicle, he pointed out to them the nature of the universe, and announced to them the laws of fate; showing them that the first generation orderly distributed to all was one, lest any particular soul should be allotted a less portion of generation than another. 41e

But when he had disseminated them through the several instruments of time adapted to each, he declared to them it was necessary that an animal the most religious of all others should make its appearance. But as the human nature is twofold, he showed them that the more excellent kind was that which would afterwards be called man.⁵ And as souls are from necessity engrafted in bodies, and as something accedes to and something departs from such bodies, he declared to them that, in the first place, one connate sense produced by violent passions was necessary to all; and, in the second place, love mingled with pleasure and grief. 42a
42b
That after these, fear and anger were necessary, with whatever else is either consequent to

⁴ The three kinds are those that fly, those that swim, and those that walk on the earth.

⁵ Timaeus was, traditionally, held to be a Pythagorean. This idea that of the two kinds of human, man and woman, the man was the “more excellent” may well be coloured by the famous (infamous?) “two columns” of the odd and even, a division into which the Pythagoreans divided the elements of manifestation (see the next page): Plato himself, in the *Republic*, says that men and women have the same virtues, and should be educated and employed alike – that the only difference between them is one of strength – not a merely theoretical position, since there were women who were members of his Academy.

these, or naturally discordant from a contrary nature. That such souls as subdue these would live justly, but such as are vanquished by them unjustly.

Thus we can see the soul in itself is created by the intellectual Demiurgus, with its various mixtures and ratios, its circles and its movements carried through the whole of time as immortal. And also that it is subject to the weaving of mortal attachments and affections, which in some fashion make it subject to Fate, at least insofar as the immortal soul is temporally vanquished by the impulses that accompany the mortal garments of the earthly life.

Pythagorean table of opposites

From Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 986a22

Finite	Infinite
Odd	Even
One	Many
Right	Left
Male	Female
Rest	Motion
Straight	Curved
Light	Darkness
Good	Evil
Square	Oblong