

Weaving the immortal and mortal parts in the Timaeus - soul, nature and body.

It's easy to go along with the simple division of soul and body which some passages of Platonic texts seem to put forward: but the problems which beset us in the material life are rarely those of the actual body itself - much more difficult for the soul to deal with are those which arise from the promptings stemming from nature. These are not material in themselves, although tied to the material sphere - and in large part underlie the whole area of modern psychology and psychotherapy. What does the Platonic tradition have to say about this?

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Timaeus, in his cosmological discourse in the dialogue named after him, describes the production of the body of the cosmos, but then corrects himself, saying that although he was about to move on to a description of the soul, his listeners shouldn't regard the body as the primary construct, taking precedence over the soul:

“But indeed the Demiurge [or Creator of the Cosmos] 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 ancient nature should be subservient to the younger. But we [humans], partaking of the casual and approximate, form discourses in a like manner; while, on the contrary, the artificer of the world constituted soul both in generation and virtue prior to, and more ancient than, body, since she was to be the mistress and ruler and the body the ruled.”

Tim.
34b-c

His discourse goes on to outline the production of soul as the mixing of indivisible and divisible “essence, sameness and difference” into something that could properly sit between the eternal and the temporal orders and have connections to both.

This first mixing is really the creation of the soul of the Cosmos, but a little later he goes on to describe the production of lesser souls - including the human soul - which will be required to have a more intimate involvement with body. Here the mixture is said to be mixed “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...”

Tim.
41d

Our souls considered in themselves are clearly the creation of an eternal intellect - that, after all, is how the Demiurge is described by the dialogue - but everything which is simply caused by eternal intellect is itself stamped with the character of immutability. However for a full unfolding of the reality, the cosmos requires an ordered extension into temporal mutability. The Demiurge uses the junior Gods as intermediaries - these are Gods of more particular characteristics, and the Demiurge addresses them saying,

“Three genera of mortals yet remain to be produced. 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. 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 aliment, and receiving them back again when dissolved by corruption.”

Tim.
41b-d

Thus the soul is directly caused by eternal intellect and simply immortal, but the embodied soul is woven for a while with mortality: the former directly ruled by providence, the latter jointly ruled by providence and fate. Timaeus says that the Demiurge took souls and “pointed out to them the nature of the universe, and announced to them the laws of fate...” - for fate is the ordering of nature, and the relation of cause and effect in the sequences of time. But what does this embodiment mean? In what way is the soul connected to nature and fate? Timaeus continues:

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 innate sense produced by violent passions was necessary to all; and, in the second place, desire mingled with pleasure and grief. That after these, fear and anger were necessary, with whatever else is either consequent to these, or naturally discordant from a contrary nature.

Tim.
42a-b

These three things - sense, desire and anger - are, perhaps, best seen as the means by which the soul as a knowing and living entity extends itself towards the material body: instruments which deliver messages from the exterior world, offering the soul the opportunity to respond according to its understanding and aspiration towards the good.

The Platonic tradition considers the embodied soul as embracing three orders - those of soul, nature and body - and therefore having three hierarchically arranged centres:

- The first is that of the **rational soul** which looks above to eternal intellect for its perfecting pattern, and endeavours to arrange itself and its subsequent centres accordingly.
- The second is the **non-rational soul** (or, if you like, the animal soul) which the rational soul “rides” upon. It should take its lead from the rational soul and provide the natural responses required for the body to live productively and safely in the material world.

● The third is the **body**, which should conform to the non-rational soul as the most passive recipient of the rational and non-rational promptings from above.

The body is *moved only* (that is to say, without the presence of the rational soul and non-rational soul, it would be completely inert); the rational soul is *self-moved* (that is to say it always has the ultimate choice to respond to the circumstances of the body, and the promptings of the non-rational soul); the non-rational soul *both moves and is moved* (that is to say its mutable nature means it is always responding to worldly conditions and to the directions of the rational soul, but is constantly shaping and informing the body).

It is the interaction between the rational soul and the non-rational soul which is really the area which gives us the most trouble. The *Timaeus*, having outlined the nature of sense, desire and anger, continues by asserting that “such souls as subdue these would live justly, but such as are vanquished by them unjustly.” And Proclus says,¹

Tim.
42b

Well, in this case too, the meeting of contraries of some sort - I mean of the immortal soul and the mortal - creates room for that which is contrary to reason. For whenever that which is mortal prevails over that which is divine in us, vice arises in us. For instance, when anger or desire prevails, for themselves the affections by which they are affected are natural, that is, [it is natural] for anger to be in anger, for desire to be desiring (for the very affection that is natural for each of them is that by which it is indeed affected). But for the divine part [to be affected in that way] is contrary to nature, because the divine part is essentially foreign to mortal passions, even if these are natural for the beings that have been allotted an irrational nature.

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The rational soul, says Porphyry² “is neither body, nor in body, but is the cause of body; because being everywhere, it is also nowhere with respect to body.” But the position of the non-rational soul is less clear: it might be argued that in essence it is not in body, but because it has no activity separate from body, it is in that sense confined to the body. The rational soul’s primary object of activity is always directed towards universals, but the non-rational soul’s activities are always towards particulars.

However no particular is without particular relationships - the body, therefore, which the soul moves via the non-rational soul is connected to many different relative influences. We are embodied in a body, which has a particular set of genes, is born to particular parents, into a particular family, location, culture, moment in time, social and religious background, and so on. All of these colour the life with inherent attitudes and assumptions, and give each individual particular tendencies as well as a number of trials shaped by the contours of the exterior life. In other words, our power of choice (both Stoic and Platonic philosophers call this the “what is up to

¹ Proclus, *Ten Problems concerning Providence*, ch. 30, trans. Opsomer and Steel.

² Porphyry, *Auxiliaries to the Perception of Intelligibles*, ch. 21, trans. Taylor.

us”) is not set in a neutral field of play, but rather the pre-shaped promptings of the non-rational soul are the very things our wisdom is tested against.

The great secret of non-rational nature is to drive all beneficial variations of actions towards the instincts through repetition - the non-rational soul has a memory which builds into the individual and the species an efficient sense of rightness. This is fine for animals which lead relatively straight-forward lives - but presents problems for the embodied soul in the complexities of human life. Much of what troubles us - sometimes to the extent of driving us to seek help from counsellors, analysts and therapists of various kind - is just this point of contact between the rational and non-rational souls. The non-rational is a necessary intermediary without which the rational soul would have to become itself irrational. Thus Proclus writes in his *Ten Problems concerning Providence*, we should consider what would happen to the soul without its intermediary,³

For perceiving the bodily affections it [that is, the rational soul] would itself be subject to the affections of sense perception, and holding the imprints of these affections, it would be subject to the affections of imagination, and desiring things needed for the body it would itself be subject to the affections of desire; and wanting to ward off whatever is harmful to the mortal animal, it would be subject to the affections of anger. For if it were not active about all these things, or rather if it were not affected by them, it would soon have a serious destructive effect on the body, and its descent would have been in vain, as the [bodies] receiving it would not have benefited from it but would suffer destruction. For it is not possible to know the things which may corrupt [the body] from outside without sense-perception that knows the particulars. Nor can it yearn for drinks and food without desire, nor manage the mortal without memory of what can harm or benefit it. In so far as it was better for the soul not to undergo itself the affections, but to let something other [i.e the non-rational soul] undergo them, even if the soul is occasionally troubled by this other thing, and this only sometimes, not always, to that extent it was a greater good for the soul to endure the non-rational [soul] than to turn itself into something irrational by undergoing the passions of the irrational [soul].

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The soul descends, according the best writers of the Platonic tradition, in order to imitate the Gods - through maintaining its gnostic integrity, it emulates the knowledge of the Gods, and through distributing its own good in beautifully arranging the lower orders, it emulates the providential energies of the Gods.

³ Proclus, *Ten Problems concerning Providence*, ch. 31, trans. Opsomer and Steel