

Being, becoming-to-be, and the Soul

Those who are regulars of these sessions will have already read the preliminary distinction Timaeus makes before he begins his description of the creation of the manifested world, but since it is a really clear introduction to the way in which the Platonic tradition sees the two orders of reality that we perceive around us, it is worth repeating:

“In the first place, therefore, as it appears to me, it is necessary to define what that is which is always *real being*, but is without generation; and what that is *which is generated indeed*, or *consists in a state of becoming to be*, but which never *really is*. The former of these indeed is apprehended by *intelligence* in conjunction with *reason*, since it always subsists according to *same*. But the latter is perceived by *opinion* in conjunction with *irrational sense*; since it subsists in a state of generation and corruption, and never truly is.”

Timaeus
27d-28a

The order of *real being* is an eternal order while that of *becoming to be* is temporal: but although these two are distinct, they are not separate – the first informs the latter, the latter reflects the former. The eternal holds a great paradigm, a model upon which the manifested cosmos is based: the eternal creative act is, according to Timaeus, the eternal contemplation by the divine intellectual God (which is called by him the Demiurge) of that intelligible paradigm (which he calls Autozoon – *Animal Itself*). The paradigm is alive and full of intellect. Naturally, the Demiurge wills the manifested cosmos to be a true reflection of that living intellect. Timaeus says,

“In consequence of a reasoning process, therefore, he [the Demiurge] found that among the things naturally visible 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.”

Timaeus
30b

By this means, then, the universe is not merely a passive reflection of the paradigm but actually contains the key characteristics of *Animal Itself* – both in its wholeness and in its parts. The cosmos as a whole is animated by what is often called the *World Soul*, and in its parts by various kinds of individual souls, of which the human soul is one kind.

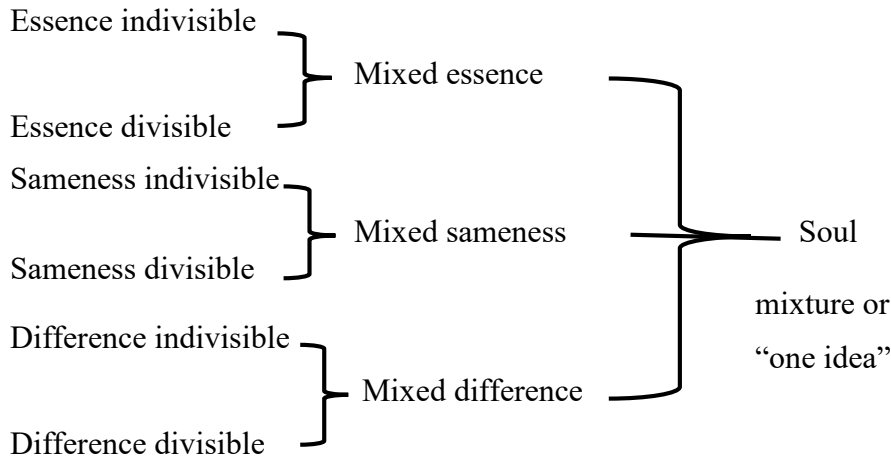
Animal Itself makes its appearance, according to the Platonic tradition, as the third moment of the primary triad of intelligibility which emerges from the Gods as they transform the unthinkable into the thinkable – in other words from that which is beyond being to that which is being. The first moment is called *the one being*; the second moment is *eternity*; the third is *animal itself*. The first establishes being, the second shows the life that is inherent in being, and the third shines forth as the intellect that is inherent in being and life together.

To act as a living intelligence, each soul must itself have this triadic structure viable in relation to both the eternal paradigm and to the visible and manifested cosmos. And so the production of soul is described by Timaeus in the following way:

From an essence impartible, 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

Timaeus
35a

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*.



What we have here is difficult to understand: is the soul part of the eternal order, or part of the temporal order? How can anything be so half-and-half, and take membership of two distinct orders? When Proclus comes to discuss the nature of the soul in his *Elements of Theology*, he makes these three affirmations, which together provide us with a clear view of how we might address this puzzle:

* Every soul is a medium between impartible natures, and the natures which are divisible about bodies. Prop. 190

* Every participable¹ soul has indeed an eternal essence, but its energy (i.e its activity) is accompanied with time. 191

* Every participable soul ranks among the number of truly existing beings, and is the first of generated natures. 192

The distinction between a thing's essence and its activity is important here, and how we view the two leads us to the way in which we consider our nature and placement.

Fully eternal things have their essence and activity completely present; but temporal things, by definition, cannot have all their activity present at once because they rely on the passing of time to move from one kind of activity to another. This is clear with regard to physical activity: the *Vanessa atalanta* (or Red Admiral) begins as an egg, and hatches into a caterpillar to do caterpillar activities; it then passes into its chrysalis phase, doing those hidden actions which will allow it to emerge into butterfly form, in which it will perform butterfly activities – one of which is to mate and produce the next generation of eggs. At no point is the creature performing all of its activities.

¹ Something which is participable is a thing whose characteristic powers are lent, so to speak, to natures which are inferior to itself in a causal chain. Thus the soul *participates* in intellect (but the participable intellect is not reduced or distributed amongst the participating souls); the power of motion which belongs to the soul is participated by the body but, again, not dissipated by that participation. In other words, here Proclus is talking about souls which are participated in some fashion by bodies.

But what if the soul's activities are those of consciousness? And what if its activities are a contemplation of its own essence – an essence which is, according to Platonic doctrine, an entire intelligible world in microcosm?

We might want to consider the power of thought to conjoin the thinker with the object of intellection: what we think about makes us, effectively, what we are. The gap between the essence of the soul and the activity of the soul becomes the difference between what we *truly are*, and what *imagine ourselves to be* – we form a kind of ghost of ourselves, and the more it is directed to the lower world, the more that ghost wanders restless and insubstantial.

Before we look at various philosophers' responses to this issue, we might go back to the *Timaeus*, when it moves from the initial creation of soul (as above at 35a) to the consequent production of individual souls.

. . . into the same krater,² 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 . . .

Timaeus
41d

The production of individual souls are “not similarly incorruptible” insofar as they are less stable than the first soul – the first soul, directly conjoined with eternal intellect, has as much stability as intellect as far as it is possible for something which is in motion; more individual souls, however, have a greater separation from intellect. We might note that Proclus in his *Commentary on the Timaeus* says that the differing proportions of essence, sameness and difference produce different kinds of soul. The mixture in which *difference* (or *otherness*) dominates produces human souls – souls that are tangled with the otherness of material existence, and consequently must especially deal with Fate, or that order which is once removed from Providence.

Com. on
Timaeus
II, 139

This understanding of the destiny of the human soul is taken up by Plotinus in his treatise known as *On the Three Hypostases*. He writes:

What is the reason that souls become oblivious of divinity, being ignorant both of themselves and him, though their allotment is from thence, and they in short partake of God? The principle therefore of evil³ to them is audacity, generation, the first *difference*,⁴ and the wish to exercise an unrestrained freedom of the will.

Ennead
V, i, 1

When, therefore, they began to be delighted with this unbounded liberty, abundantly employing the power of being moved from themselves, they ran in a direction contrary [to their first course], and thus becoming most distant from their source, they were at length ignorant that they were thence derived. Just as children who are immediately torn from their parents, and have for a long time been nurtured at a great distance from them, become ignorant both of themselves and their parents. Hence, souls neither seeing their

² The *krater* is a mixing bowl (Greeks customarily mix their wine with water in a krater, in varying proportions according to the circumstances in which the wine was to be drunk). Proclus speaking theologically considers the Demiurge to be Zeus, and identifies the krater as the Goddess Hera – spouse of Zeus.

³ By *evil* here, Plotinus is merely naming something which tends to reduce anything to a condition less than its full nature allows.

⁴ The five genera of being are, essence, sameness, *difference*, motion and permanency. This *difference*, therefore, which is the first subsistence of difference, and which is the source of all diversity, causes souls by predominating in them to be forgetful of deity, and themselves.

father, nor themselves, despise themselves through ignorance of their race, but honour other things, and admiring everything rather than themselves, being vehemently astonished about, and adhering to sensible natures, they as much as possible hurl themselves [from their true parents], and thus despise the beings from which they have become elongated.

Hence, the honour which they pay to sensible objects, and the contempt of themselves, happen to be the causes of their all-perfect ignorance. For at the same time they pursue and admire something else, and acknowledge themselves to be inferior to that which they admire and pursue. But the soul admitting that it is something subordinate to things which are generated and corrupted, and apprehending that it is the most ignoble and mortal of everything which it honours, neither believes in the nature nor power of God.

Hence, it is necessary that there should be a twofold discourse to those who are thus affected, in order to convert them to the contraries [to the things they admire], and to first natures, and to elevate them as far as to that which is highest, and one, and the first. What, therefore, is each of these discourses? One of them, indeed, is that which shows the cause why the soul honours these sensible objects, which we have elsewhere largely discussed; but the other teaches and reminds the soul of the greatness of its origin, and its true dignity; which discussion is prior to the former, and when manifested will render that manifest.

Of this, therefore, we must now speak. For this is proximate and conducive to the object of enquiry. For that which is investigated is soul; and what it investigates should be known by it, in order that it may in the first place learn whether it has the power of investigating things of this kind; and also whether it has such an eye as is able to see them, and whether they are properly objects of its enquiry. For if they are foreign to its nature, why should it investigate them? But if they are allied to it, it is expedient and possible to discover them.

It is necessary for the soul to embrace otherness – and for souls that are habitually embodying themselves to do so more than those whose activity is less concerned with actual materiality. The soul is both gnostic and vital: in its gnostic activities it must deal with forgetfulness which leads it to various states of ignorance; in its vital activities, the human soul must deal with that which is not *per se* vital (that is to say material bodies, which without soul are inanimate) and therefore it is likely to experience, in some form, death.

Proclus, in his *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, discusses the experiences of the soul as it moves between the two states of existence.

We assert that when souls abide with the gods they act intelligently and enjoy both the will of the gods, which is of the form of the good, and their uncontaminated giving; but proceeding therefrom through the imagination and a certain indeterminate motion, they encounter images of the realities of the other world and appearances in place of what is genuine, and beholding the representations and images of the realities become all excited about them; though they long for what they have seen, yet they are led away instead to what they do not long for; but reverting in themselves to the primary principles, they change back again from the representations to the original exemplars. Herein they require intelligence and reason; for the way back is through knowledge, and it is reason that crosses over to intellect from sense-perception and imagination. Now different souls are akin to different sights, and for this reason some run after some images, and some run after others, since they favour the images and shadows of what they have seen in the other world.

The descent of the soul into the body has separated it from the divine causes which filled it with intelligence and power and purity, and has united it with nature that produces generation and with things implicated in matter which fill it with forgetfulness and error and ignorance. As it descended it received from the universe the accretions of many forms of life and divers vestures which drag it down into this mortal constitution and obstruct the contemplation of the realities. Now the soul that is to be correctly brought away from this world to that ever wakeful level of being must regulate the secondary and tertiary functions that are attached to it as “the shells and sea-weed to the sea-god Glaucus,” must prevent the impulses that proceed outward from it, and recall the genuine realities and the divine being which was the origin of its descent and should be the goal towards which our whole life hastens. Now the elements within us that require perfection are the irrational, which is capable of being regulated and trained through habits, and the faculty of choice, which must be restrained from the irrational appetites and implication therewith, and in addition our cognitive faculty, which requires recollection of the realities; since what is recalled to mind, what is trained through habit, and what becomes more moderate through admonition and instruction all differ.

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Damascius approaches this issue in a very different register, using the myth of Dionysus and the Titans as the symbol of gnostic and vital otherness. In the myth, Dionysus, the son of Zeus by Persephone, is waylaid by the Titans (he is trapped by being shown his own image in a mirror) and torn apart by them; the Olympian Gods battle with the Titans and eventually Zeus throw his thunderbolts at them. The dismembered Dionysus is re-integrated (‘re-membered’) and unified. The ashes of the smitten Titans form the material from which humans are made. Damascius writes;

In what sense are men created from the fragments of the Titans? - From the fragments, because their life is reduced to the utmost limit of differentiation; of the Titans, because they are the lowest of Creators and in immediate contact with their creation. For Zeus is the 'Father of men and Gods,' the Titans of men only, not of Gods, and they cannot even be called fathers, but have become men themselves, and not simply themselves, but their dead bodies, and even of these only the fragments, the fragmentary condition of our existence being thus transferred to those who are its causes.

Damascius
on the
Phaedo
I, 8

The Titanic mode of life is the irrational mode, by which rational life is torn asunder.

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It is better to acknowledge its existence everywhere, since in any case at its source there are Gods, the Titans; then also on the plane of rational life, this apparent self-determination, which seems to aim at belonging to itself alone and neither to the superior nor to the inferior, is wrought in us by the Titans; through it we tear asunder the Dionysus in ourselves, breaking up the natural continuity of our being and our partnership, so to speak, with the superior and the inferior. While in this condition, we are Titans; but when we recover that lost unity, we become Dionysus and we attain what can be truly called completeness.

First, the soul must constitute an image of herself in the body (that is what animating the body means); secondly, she must be in sympathy with her phantom because of the likeness, since every form is drawn towards its replica as a result of its innate concentration upon itself; thirdly, having entered into the divided body, she must be torn asunder with it and end in utter disintegration; until through a life of purification she gathers herself from her dispersed state, unties the bond of sympathy, and actualizes the primal life within her that exists by itself without the phantom.

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The [Orphic] myth describes the same events as taking place in the prototype of the soul. When Dionysus had projected his reflection into the mirror, he followed it and was thus scattered over the universe. Apollo gathers him and brings him back to heaven, for he is the purifying God and truly the saviour of Dionysus, and therefore he is celebrated as the 'Dionysus-Giver'. 129

Damascius summarizes the passing of the soul from its mundane limitation to its realignment with its intellectual causes a little later in his Commentary:

Dialectical thought should either start from the divine riddles developing the mysterious truth in them, or come to rest in them and derive its final confirmation from their symbolical indications, or it should combine the two, as Socrates does here [in the *Phaedo*, 62b]. The whole discussion [of the early part of the *Phaedo*] consisting of two problems, the ban on suicide, and, in spite of this, the necessity of detaching oneself from the body, he makes the divine mysteries the starting-point for the first and the final point of the second. 165

In this, he imitates the mystic and cosmic cycle of souls. Having fled the undivided Dionysian life and fixed their actual existence on the level of the Titanic and confined way of life, they are in shackles and in 'custody' [62b4]; but when they submit to their punishment and take care of themselves, then, cleansed from the taints of Titanic existence and gathered together, they become Bacchus, that is to say, they become whole again, as the Dionysus who remains above is whole. 166

The beginning and end of the soul's journey is within the divine – a state which is a mysterious riddle for those whose consciousness is trapped in the separation of the merely rational. But the descent from rationality to the non-rational materiality of the body further separates and scatters the consciousness, a state presided over by the Titans (the *ti* of Titans indicating particularity and therefore a division of the universal).

Plotinus asks us to explore philosophically the issue of our mixed nature, and whether we have the power to address it (and, therefore, whether we can bring to bear a divine perspective on condition of the mundane life). Damascius, in his turn, asks us to undergo the initiatory experience of following the Orphic rite of re-integration expressed in the myth of Dionysus. He says,

The object of the initiatory rites is to take souls back to a final destination, which was also the starting-point from which they first set out on their downward journey, and where Dionysus gave them being, seated on his father's throne, that is to say, firmly established in the integral Zeusian life. It follows necessarily that the initiate will 'live with the Gods,' in accordance with the design of the initiating Gods. Damascius on the *Phaedo* 168