

Soul principles and Nature

How are we to understand Plato's philosophy of soul and nature? Perhaps a good starting point is the story¹ told by Timaeus in the dialogue named after him, in which he relates how the manifested universe emerges from the eternal realm. It is not, strictly speaking, a creation unfolded in moments of *time* but nevertheless presented as that in order to explain a *causal* sequence. This is the nature of a mythic story where all its elements of reality are immediately and always present, but given a narrative structure so that we can listen to it in the childhood of our understanding.

Plato's presentation of the creation of the cosmos begins with a highly symbolic description of the body of the cosmos in geometrical and mathematical terms and is then followed by a description of the soul of the cosmos – one with a nature that would best animate that body. Timaeus in his narration does specifically say that although he has presented the nature of the body first and that of the soul second, in reality soul comes before body; this priority of soul to body is a causal, rather than a temporal one, as Francis Cornford comments² “Plato's point is made at length in *Laws X*, where it is argued that all motion must have its source in a self-moving thing, which is precisely the definition of soul.”³

The same affirmation is made in the *Phaedrus*:⁴

... the beginning of motion is derived from that which moves itself ... For every body to which motion externally accedes, is inanimate. But that to which motion is inherent from itself, is animate (*εμψυχον*); as if this was the very nature of soul.

It is here that Plato calls the soul “the fountain and principle of motion to other things which are moved.” That is to say in causal terms what comes before soul is unmoving and eternal Intellect, so that the first thing that moves is soul, and that which follows it (nature and body) only moves because soul has set them into activity.

What is the nature of soul and what is its place in the Platonic scheme? Stated briefly this philosophic tradition holds that there are two conditions of being, (1) the eternal and (2) the temporal:

“. . . it is necessary to define (1) what that is which is always *real being*, but is without generation; and (2) 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.”

The tradition considers that soul is a nature that sits between these two orders of reality, having an intermediate state and a set of intermediate powers: it is neither entirely unchanging and eternal, nor entirely changeable and temporal. Being such an

¹ It is a story: Timaeus himself says (at 29d) that he can only give an *eikota mythos* – a “mythic image” of the creation of the manifested universe. This phrase is translated by various translators as a “likely account”, or a “likely story” but we might usefully understand it as meaning *a story of likeness*. It is not a rationally precise analysis of creation, but a story which invites the hearer to ponder, meditate, or even dream upon the profundity of the divine act of creation.

² *Plato's Cosmology*, p. 59.

³ *Laws* 896a.

⁴ *Phaedrus* 245d.

intermediary it has connections with both orders: retiring inwards it can contemplate the beauties and truths of eternity; looking outwards it can join in with the play of the evanescent world. Or, to change prepositional terms, looking upward we look to the world of eternal causes, looking downward we look to the world of temporal effects.

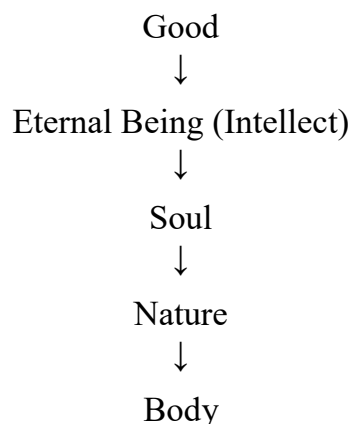
Interestingly the *Timaeus* begins with Socrates summarizing the main points of the *Republic* in which a living organism (either a city or the human self) is organized, and then asks to see an image of that living organism in action. Another speaker, Critias, responds by telling the tale of the struggle between Atlantis and Athens in long distant times. Athens was considered to be under the aegis of Athena, Goddess of wisdom; Atlantis under that of Poseidon, God of the Ocean of generation. Thus we are presented with image of the tension between the upward pull of intellect and the downward pull of generation and materiality: the life of inner stillness and that of outward activity.⁵

We are more used to thinking about soul that is individualized than that which is more universal – especially the soul of the cosmos (or as it is often called the *world soul*); but the nature of both is at heart something which accesses the pure intellectual forms through intellect and reason, and applies this through an outward and downward providential activity.⁶

What lies “above” the soul is the stillness of eternity – whatever is truly eternal simply *is* and hence is not moving either from place to place or from one condition to another. In other words everything which is causally before the soul does not move. That is not to say that it is dead, nor is it devoid of dynamic power – but all its activities are present to it simultaneously.

What lies below soul are the increasingly materialized and dispersed effects of the eternal order translated into temporal sequences: the plant must start as a seed, become a first shoot, grow into a fully formed organism, produce its fruit, and render up the seeds of the next generation so that the cycle can begin anew.

The Platonic tradition sees reality as an overflowing of Good. In outline, what is simply the Good as the purest unity becomes an order of eternal being which is at once life and pure intellect; this overflows into soul which is a living, thinking immaterial dweller in time; this in turn expresses its potential in the ordering we call nature; and this ultimately manifests itself as body.



⁵ The full story of this war is only touched upon in the *Timaeus*; much more detail of it is given in the *Critias* – a dialogue that was unfinished because of the death of Plato, as we are told by Plutarch in his *Life of Solon*.

⁶ The great difference here is that the whole soul – that of the cosmos – perceives those forms clearly and applies them without distortion, whereas the individual soul (at least the human kind of soul) struggles to do so.

Because eternal Being is intrinsically alive and knowing it is often called Intellect and its nature and relation to Soul is described by Proclus in these words:

“The divine and demiurgic Intellect contains pluralities in unity, divisible things undivided and distinguishables undiscriminated. Soul is what first separates these contents that exist previously in perfect unity in that Intellect — not our soul only, but the divine Soul too. For Soul has not been granted thoughts that are established on the level of eternity, but she aims at grasping the full actuality of Intellect; and in her striving for this perfection and for the form of comprehension that belongs to that one and simple being she circles around Intellect ... Intellect thinks all Forms as one, and Soul sees them all one at a time.”⁷

This circling around the united fullness of Intellect in order to see all things “one at a time” is really why soul moves: indeed this striving to live and think *the all* is what sets up the moving world which we understand as the manifested cosmos. The cosmos as emerged from the eternal can be seen as comprising three distinct but linked orders: that of Soul, that of Nature and that of Body.

What are the characteristics of the three orders?

Soul *as soul* is essentially separable from the impulses and habits of nature and from the materiality of body. This is because the soul has access to the forms which underlie the manifested cosmos: “Every soul contains all the forms which intellect primarily possesses” (*Elements of Theology*, proposition 194). This, in turn means that it contains in itself the criteria for judging the good of its own activity, and, should it have the discipline to act upon these it can reap the rewards of its inherent power of self-motion. These have been laid out in the 17th proposition:

Everything originally self-moving is capable of reversion upon itself.

For if it moves itself, its motive activity is directed upon itself, and mover and moved exist simultaneously as one thing. ... And if one and the same thing moves and is moved, it will (as a self-mover) have its activity of motion directed upon itself. But to direct activity upon anything is to turn towards that thing. Everything, therefore, which is originally self-moving is capable of reversion upon itself.

Body does not have this power of self-reversion as we see from the 16th proposition:

For it is not in the nature of any body to revert upon itself. That which reverts upon anything is conjoined with that upon which it reverts: hence it is evident that every part of a body reverted upon itself must be conjoined with every other part, since self-reversion is precisely the case in which the reverted subject and that upon which it has reverted become identical. But this is impossible for a body, and universally for any divisible thing: for the whole of a divisible thing cannot be conjoined with the whole of itself, because of the separation of its parts, which occupy different positions in space. It is not in the nature, then, of any body to revert upon itself so that the whole is reverted upon the whole.

Body, being a combination of form and matter inevitably shares in the passivity of matter as well as its separation into parts. It is the furthest remove from the impassivity of intellect.

Nature (*phusis*) is in Greek philosophy the living and responsive element that is *within* material manifestation but it is not itself body. The primary difference between soul

⁷ Proclus, *Commentary on the Parmenides*, 808. Tr. Morrow and Dillon.

proper and nature is that while soul is separable from body (both in terms of essence and activity) nature's activity is always tied to body – unlike soul itself it must always act through body. As Proclus says⁸ “As we have therefore shown what nature is according to Plato, that it is an incorporeal essence, inseparable from bodies, containing the reasons or productive principles of them, and incapable of perceiving itself...” So while we can consider soul as an intermediary between intellect and body, nature is an intermediary between soul and body. Since nature does not hold within itself the forms that soul accesses, it is always dependent upon some soul to supply it with form – a form particularised for a specific purpose. From this point of view it is passive to something outside itself. Nature, therefore, is the seat of *pathos* – always reactive rather than proactive, always building on experience, and wherever possible it seeks to repeat what has proved expedient.

Perhaps a useful passage from Proclus *Commentary on the Parmenides*⁹ will help here in which he is discussing Plato's description of the power of forms to produce material instantiations of themselves as like a seal being impressed on wax:

What, then, is the immediate cause of the imposition of the seal? Matter is in the place of the wax, and the individual man is to be identified with the imprint, so what are we to identify with the signet-ring that descends upon objects, if not Nature that permeates Matter and thus moulds the sense-realm with its reason-principles? With the hand that wields the signet-ring we may identify the Soul, which directs Nature, Soul as a whole directing Nature as a whole, and individual souls directing individual natures; and with that soul that does the impressing of the seal by means of the hand and the signet-ring may we not identify the Intellect, which through Soul and Nature fills the sense-realm with Forms, that which we may truly characterise as Resource,¹⁰ the begetter of those reason-principles which flow forth as far as Matter?

Thomas Taylor, in his Introduction to the *Physics* of Aristotle, notes the following:¹¹

The rational soul has three conditions or modes of subsistence; one, most perfect, according to which it abides in itself, does not proceed into body, and is similar to intellect; on which account also it is then called intellect, and its energy is the same with its essence. It has, in the second place, a most imperfect condition, according to which it proceeds into body, has no knowledge of anything else than a corporeal nature, and is in pure capacity with respect to all intelligibles, or the proper objects of intellectual vision. It has also a middle condition between these two. So far, therefore, as it abides in itself, and is not converted to body, it is called *intellect in energy*; so far as it proceeds into body, it is called *intellect in capacity*; and so far as it begins to be perfected and to acquire the habit of science, it is called *intellect in habit*; this being its middle condition, according to which it arrives at its own perfection, through the acquisition of habits.

⁸ *Commentary on the Timaeus*, I, 12.25.

⁹ *Commentary on the Parmenides*, 884.11-26.

¹⁰ Note the reference to *Symposium* 203b.

¹¹ *Works of Aristotle* volume 1, p. 1.