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PLATO'S THEORY OF REINCARNATION: ESCHATOLOGY AND NATURAL PHILOSOPHY

DOUGLAS R. CAMPBELL

IF THE TWIN PILLARS OF PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY are the theory of forms and the immortality of the soul, then the pillars of his psychology are the theory of the divided soul, the identification of the self as the soul, and the theory of reincarnation.¹ Plato's eschatology deserves this status because it is at the intersection of some of the most important Platonic commitments, such as that the soul is immortal; that the virtuous person is rewarded both in this life and afterward, whereas the vicious person is punished; that the proper activity of the soul is contemplation of the forms; and that embodiment disrupts that activity. Yet, the theory of reincarnation is for the most part neglected, and when it is treated at all, it is usually done in the context of Plato's myths or as part of a general protreptic strategy.

The belief in reincarnation is central to Plato's philosophy, and, as I shall argue here, reincarnation is the primary tool that the gods have to ensure the perfection of the cosmos. The *Timaeus* presents cosmic perfection as depending on whether every kind of living thing that exists in the Intelligible Living Thing exists in the created world, and the theory of reincarnation explains how living things come to be. The *Laws*, meanwhile, argues that cosmic perfection depends on the victory of virtue over vice throughout the cosmos, and the gods ensure that this happens by implementing a system of rewards and punishments that is identical to people getting the reincarnations that they merit. We shall see that both the *Timaeus* and the *Laws* sideline the individual soul's moral improvement through punishment in favor of prioritizing cosmic perfection. It is important that we humans are a mere part of the cosmos and exist for its sake, not the other way around.

This article does not just take Plato's eschatology seriously but locates it within the rest of his philosophical system, especially the

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¹ All translations of Plato here are my own.

psychology, natural philosophy, and cosmology.² In section 1 I argue that the theory of reincarnation has important explanatory power in natural-philosophical contexts. In section 2 I argue that the theory of reincarnation follows in the first place from a set of key Platonic doctrines. In section 3 I argue that reincarnation is crucial for achieving cosmic perfection as the *Laws* understands it and that souls that escape the cycle of reincarnation do not leave the cosmos but are merely in the part of it that is appropriate to them.

I

Reincarnation as Natural Philosophy. The theory of reincarnation is an important part of Plato's natural philosophy.³ The *Timaeus's*

² For three laudable attempts at "taking seriously" Plato's myths, see Julia Annas, "Plato's Myths of Judgment," *Phronesis* 27, no. 2 (1982): 119–43; Christopher Rowe, "The Status of Myth in Plato's *Timaeus*," in *Plato Physicus: Cosmologia e anthropologia nel Timeo*, ed. Carlo Natali and Stefano Maso (Amsterdam: Adolf Hakkert, 2012), 21–31; and Rachana Kamtekar, "The Soul's (After-)Life," *Ancient Philosophy* 36 (2016): 1–18. However, each tries (explicitly) to deal with the myths on their own terms. I will not limit the evidence just to Plato's myths. As I argue in section 1, eschatology is considered outside Plato's myths. Moreover, there is a need to see reincarnation as flowing from commitments outside eschatology.

³ It would be too ambitious here to consider in detail the relationship between *muthoi* and *logoi* in Plato's thought, but it is important to say something about his use of myths in general, which has historically been criticized. We might recall Diogenes Laertius's report that some people thought he used too many myths (III.80) and the criticism of Colotes that Plato's use of myth is hypocritical reported by Proclus (*in Rem Publ.* 105.23–1). Consider also Ian Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 154, who said that "to me these myths tremble between the sublime and the tedious." For accounts of *muthoi* for Plato, see Gregory Vlastos, "The Disorderly Motion in the *Timaios*," *The Classical Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1939): 71–83; and Christopher Rowe, "The Status of the Myth of the *Gorgias*, or: Taking Plato Seriously," in *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, ed. Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco J. Gonzalez (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 187–98. Both argue that a *muthos* is merely a narrative tale or story. See also Myles F. Burnyeat, "*Eikōs Muthos*," *Rhizai* 2 (2005): 143–65, who disagrees. Luc Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker*, trans. Gerard Naddaf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), and Glenn W. Most, "Plato's Exoteric Myths," in *Plato and Myth*, 13–24, develop more robust accounts, with the latter specifying a set of eight criteria. Here I

discussion of the theory begins thus: “[W]e have now pretty much completed the task assigned at the start to describe the universe up to the coming-to-be of human beings. For we must mention how the other living things came about, but there is no need to say much.”⁴ It is part of the economy of the theory of reincarnation that it plays an explanatory natural-philosophical role and a moral-eschatological one, familiar to us from the *Republic’s* myth of Er. Plato signals to the reader that it plays an explanatory role here by saying he is presenting a *logos*.⁵

It might strike us as strange or unexpected that reincarnation—usually the subject of myths, for Plato—would appear as the center of a natural-philosophical theory, but the relationship between *muthoi* and *logoi* in the *Timaeus* is flexible. Plato distinguishes between *logoi* and *muthoi* but not in a way that would allow us to say that eschatology belongs only to the domain of mythology. As evidence of the flexibility of these categories, Timaeus’s speech is called an *eikōs muthos* (“a likely story”) three times—namely, at 29d2, 59c6, and 68d2.⁶ It is called

am more interested in arguing that reincarnation is not merely the subject of mythology, as opposed to those many commentators on Plato who treat the theory of reincarnation as though it is merely mythological or that the afterlife in general is inaccessible to philosophers. For instance, Gerard Naddaf, “Poetic Myths of the Afterlife: Plato’s Last Song,” in *Reflections on Plato’s Poetics: Essays from Beijing* (Berrima: Academic Printing and Publishing, 2016), 113, says that this part of Plato’s thinking can be represented “only by eschatological or cosmological myths. It is inaccessible to explanation.” See also Chad Jorgensen’s claims that Plato’s eschatological accounts are “much better suited to a creative discourse aimed at capturing the imagination of a particular audience than to an attempt to describe an independently existing reality.” Chad Jorgensen, *The Embodied Soul in Plato’s Later Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 199.

⁴ *Timaeus* 90e. I translate every occurrence here of *zō(i)on* as “living thing.” I would normally prefer “animal,” but we move quickly to a discussion of the intelligible *zō(i)on* from *Timaeus* 30c–d, which contains all the other *zō(i)a* inside it, and it is more natural here to speak of a living thing with all the other living things inside it, rather than an animal with all the other animals inside it.

⁵ *Timaeus* 90e.

⁶ This flies in the face of David Gallop, *Plato’s Phaedo* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1975), 224, who says that Plato’s “myths do not lend themselves to logical analysis.” The *Timaeus* is a *logos*, too. Recall also from Joseph B. Skemp, *The Theory of Motion in Plato’s Later Dialogues* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1967), xv, the claim that “the physics of the *Timaeus* is *mythos* and can never be *logos*: it must aspire to the *eikōs mythos*.”

an *eikōs logos* (“a likely account”) seven times—namely, at 30b7, 48d2, 53d5–6, 55d5, 56a1, 57d6, and 90e8.⁷ This flip-flopping, even sometimes within the span of less than a page, suggests that there is no important distinction between myths and accounts.⁸ On other occasions, there appears to be a meaningful distinction: In the *Protagoras*, Protagoras has Socrates’ blessing to give either a myth or an account, and it seems that there is a nonnegligible difference.⁹ The distinction appears throughout the corpus, but usually in ways we would not expect. For instance, in the *Symposium*, Aristophanes calls his fantastical tale of spherical men being sundered by the gods a *logos*, not, as we might expect, a *muthos*.¹⁰

The more important episode, given our interest in eschatology, is Socrates’ insistence to Callicles that his story of the afterlife is not a *muthos* but a *logos*. He asks Callicles to “give ear, then, as they say, to a very fine account [*logou*], which you will think is a story [*muthon*], even though I think it is an account; for what I am about to tell you I present as the truth.”¹¹ Socrates later repeats that Callicles might misunderstand him as offering a story instead of an account.¹² This passage is evidence that Plato does conceive a real difference between a *logos* and a *muthos*, but it is not one that has to do with the afterlife: At a minimum, Plato thinks that the afterlife can rightly be the subject of a *logos*.

The afterlife is discussed outside Plato’s myths, and not just at the end of the *Gorgias*. Two examples are *Timaeus* 90e–92c and *Phaedo* 81b–82d. Timaeus explicitly begins his discussion of the system of reincarnation by calling it an *eikōs logos*.¹³ The passage is sometimes read as mythological, despite the fact that Timaeus is clear that it is an

⁷ Luc Brisson, “Why Is the *Timaeus* Called an *Eikōs Muthos* and an *Eikōs Logos*?” in *Plato and Myth*, 369–91, is a thorough study of the double status of the *Timaeus*. See also Stephen Halliwell, “The Subjection of *Mythos* to *Logos*: Plato’s Citations of the Poets,” *Classical Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2000): 94–112, for a general study on the relationship between philosophy and mythology.

⁸ Plato also calls the *Laws* a myth (6.752a; 7.812a) and even, once, a tragedy (7.817b).

⁹ *Protagoras* 320c.

¹⁰ *Symposium* 193d.

¹¹ *Gorgias* 523a.

¹² *Gorgias* 526d and 527a.

¹³ *Timaeus* 90e.

account.¹⁴ The passage from the *Phaedo* is exceptional because it tends to be ignored by those who interpret Plato's views of the afterlife as coming only in myths.¹⁵ It blends in well enough with the accompanying argument for the immortality of the soul that there is hardly any pivoting to the view that those who value injustice will be reborn as wolves.¹⁶ Scholars will occasionally (try to) list every myth in Plato's dialogues, and while the *Timaeus's* theory of reincarnation tends to appear despite the fact that it is called a *logos*, *Phaedo* 81b–82d is always overlooked.¹⁷ In other words, nobody has ever even claimed that *Phaedo* 81b–82d is mythological, and yet it features reincarnation.¹⁸

There is a sense in which all living things serve the purpose of making the cosmos resemble the Intelligible Living Thing, which is the model that the Demiurge looked to when creating the world as a living thing endowed with a body and a soul. The view here is that God used the system of reincarnation to make animals come into being; resemblance to the Intelligible Living Thing is the reason for which he made them exist. For this model required that the Demiurge make the world contain all animals inside it:

Let us lay it down that the cosmos is more similar to the Living Thing, inside of which all the other living things exist as parts, both individually and as species, than to anything else. For that Living Thing has and encompasses within itself all the intelligible living things, just as the cosmos brings together us humans and all the visible creatures. For since God above all wanted to make the cosmos similar to the best of all the intelligible things and perfect in every way, he made it a visible living thing that had inside it all the living things that have an affinity to it in their nature.¹⁹

¹⁴ See Most, "Exoteric Myths," 24, who lists virtually the whole *Timaeus* as two separate myths (20d–25e and 29d–92c).

¹⁵ See, for instance, the list of Platonic myths in Most, "Exoteric Myths," 24, which does not feature this passage.

¹⁶ *Phaedo* 82a. An important feature of Plato's myths is that they are explicitly cut off from the surrounding discourse; see Most, "Exoteric Myths," 18, on the beginning of myths as "explicitly signalled."

¹⁷ Jorgensen claims that "the eschatological myths provide the only real evidence we possess for how Plato conceives of the existence of the soul in separation from the body, as well as for how we are to understand the relationship between this life and the next one," which overlooks at the very least *Phaedo* 81b–82d. Jorgensen, *The Embodied Soul*, 165.

¹⁸ Annas, "Myths of Judgment," 127, takes the passage seriously but still says that Plato is being "ironical."

¹⁹ *Timaeus* 30c–31a.

The reasoning in this passage seems to be that, since God made the cosmos resemble the Intelligible Living Thing, the cosmos had to contain all the other living things inside it, such as bees, humans, and horses. The reason for this is that the Intelligible Living Thing itself contains all the living things inside it: not sensible bees and horses, but in some way, the intelligible versions of the living things with which we are familiar. God, therefore, had to make our world contain the other life forms too. These are the visible creatures (and humans) identified in the passage.

Plato, notably, does not clarify whether our cosmos is home to all the same living things that exist intelligibly within the Intelligible Living Thing: It is not clear what he means at the end of the passage when he says that our cosmos contains within itself the creatures whose natures are akin to the cosmos.²⁰ We do know that one reason why there is such a diversity of animal life in the world is that the perfection of the cosmos depends on it. This might help us to understand why the Demiurge creates human beings in the first place. The *Timaeus* tells the story of how God created the world's soul and body, used the same mixture of soul-stuff to create our rational souls, and then gave our souls to the lower gods, who fashion our bodies and the mortal kinds of soul, then create plants to protect and nourish our bodies, and institute a policy of reincarnation upon our death. Yet the dialogue is not clear about God's motivations for creating us in the first place or for wanting us to be embodied. It might well have been that this was all part of God's plan to make the world resemble his models as much as possible. If so, considering how unhappy our souls are made by embodiment and terrible rebirths, God might then be engaging in the same calculation as the philosopher-rulers when they decide they must sacrifice the happiness of individuals in the city for the sake of promoting happiness in the city overall.²¹ God knows that he will not be maximizing every

²⁰ Moreover, the passage does not say that all species must be instantiated in the cosmos at every moment. I take this up below.

²¹ Here is a telling passage from the *Laws*, when the Athenian addresses the atheist: "Now, you abominable man, you are one part, a tiny speck that still always promotes the good of the whole, and it escapes your notice that everything comes to be for the sake the entire universe in order that it might have a fulfilling life [*eudaimōn biō(i)*]. The world did not come to be for your sake: you exist for its sake. For every doctor and every skilled craftsman does everything for the sake of the whole; they promote what is best overall, and

individual's happiness, but the overall perfection of the cosmos is more important.²²

The discussion of reincarnation at the end of the *Timaeus* picks up on an earlier discussion at 39e–41d. Here, Plato affirms that the Demiurge aimed to create the same kinds (*hoiai*) and amount (*hosai*) of animals in the visible living thing that are held (*skhein*) in the Intelligible Living Thing.²³ There are four such kinds (*genos* and *eidos*).²⁴ They are the (so-called lower) gods, birds, marine life, and land animals.²⁵ The Demiurge then creates the lower gods as balls of fire that rotate on their axis and revolve around the earth. He addresses the newly created gods and tells them that there are three kinds of animals not yet created, and that “if they do not come into being, then the cosmos will be incomplete

they create a part for the sake of the whole, not a whole for the sake of a part.” *Laws* 10.903c–d.

²² After all, Plato does use the language of the *Timaeus* (for example, blending, mixing, looking to the forms as models, and so on) to describe the rule of the philosopher-rulers at *Republic* 6.500–01.

²³ *Timaeus* 39e.

²⁴ *Timaeus* 39e and 40a.

²⁵ One wonders why there are precisely these four kinds. We might recall Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), 46–51, on the so-called great chain of being, and his construal of the principle of plenitude as the premise that the perfection of the Demiurge guaranteed that he would create every kind of being that could be reasonably imagined as part of the created world. See Sarah Broadie, “Theodicy and Pseudo–History in the *Timaeus*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 21 (2001): 1–28, for a rebuttal. Plato does not make it clear enough for us to settle the question, but we can make some progress in clarifying it for him. The four kinds of living things reflect four regions of the created world: heaven, the sky, underwater, and the land. (The implicit categorization of humans as land animals, rather than as worthy of our own distinct category, reflects the zoology of the *Statesman* [see 264d and 266e].) In fact, Plato even presents the four kinds of living things as corresponding to the regions in which they dwell (39e–40a). This point has been long acknowledged by commentators; see Francis Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company, 1937), 117; and Karel Thein, “The Life Forms and Their Model in Plato's *Timaeus*,” *Rhizai* 2 (2006): 241–73. It seems that there is, therefore, no cosmological reason why hawks and eagles have to exist: It suffices that any kind of bird would exist. This squares with the system we find at the end of the *Timaeus*, where different vices are responsible for turning someone into a cow or a snake. Specifically with respect to the question of why Plato chose these categories in particular: They seem to map onto the Demiurge's creation of the world–body as an organization of the four so-called elements, each of which defines one of the four regions in the visible world.

[*ateleēs*]; for it does not have in itself all the living things that it is required to have if it is to be sufficiently complete [*mellei teleos hikanōs*].”²⁶

The responsibility to create the remaining three kinds falls on the lower gods because, as the Demiurge explains, if he created them, then they would equal (*isazō*) the gods.²⁷ For this reason, he creates only the rational kind of soul that the lower gods will embody in humans.²⁸ He then retires.²⁹ Thus the system of reincarnation that we find at the end of the dialogue is an explanation of how the lower gods carry out this duty and how the cosmos came to be complete.

This line of reasoning does not demand the full theory of reincarnation that we find at *Timaeus* 90e–92c, however, for two reasons. First, it does not demand reincarnation at all: God could have simply created each species and given them the means to reproduce. Second, it is consistent with each reincarnation being assigned randomly. At the end of the dialogue, by contrast, we find a worked-out system according to which each reincarnation is determined by the way we have lived our previous lives. For instance, if we spend our lives being led by our mortal kinds of soul, we will be reborn as land animals whose heads are close to the ground, reflecting that we never looked up at the cosmos as humans.³⁰ This is because Plato is in the first place motivated by the moral considerations. Consider that he presents being reborn as a shellfish as a penalty (*dikē*) that people pay for their unintelligence (*amathia*). He certainly could not accept a system that has our future embodiments be distributed randomly: God’s stewardship of the cosmos is too careful for that. The *Timaeus* exploits the moral considerations for which he accepts the theory and uses it for the natural-philosophical purpose of explaining the emergence of nonhuman life.

Let me consider the following objection. Plato often presents ahistorical, hypothetical accounts of improvement and deterioration. For instance, consider the deteriorations of the aristocratic person and state in books 8 and 9 of the *Republic*. If Plato intends the theory of reincarnation in the same way, then it cannot play the explanatory role that I have said it does here.

²⁶ *Timaeus* 41b–c.

²⁷ *Timaeus* 41c.

²⁸ *Timaeus* 41d–e.

²⁹ *Timaeus* 42e.

³⁰ *Timaeus* 91e–92a.

In reply, consider the way that Plato explains the existence of fingernails in the *Timaeus*. He argues that they are composed of sinew, skin, and bone, which are the auxiliary causes (*sunaitia*); what is most truly a cause (*aitiōtatē*), however, is the gods' thought (*dianoia*) that in the future "animals and women would come to be from men," and so men should be equipped and familiar with the nails that they would need as animals because animals tend to rely on claws, hoofs, and nails for their sustenance.³¹ This explanation does nothing at all if reincarnation is hypothetical. The fact that reincarnation figures in his explanations of natural phenomena tells us how literally he intends the theory.³²

However, reincarnation as it appears in Plato's dialogues cannot be explained exclusively in terms of its explanatory power or any moral considerations that underlie it. For these considerations do not allow Plato to make the inferences he makes in every dialogue in which the theory explicitly appears: for instance, that mindless people are reborn as snakes,³³ that gluttons are reborn as donkeys,³⁴ or that a soul that has never been acquainted with the forms can be reborn only as a wild animal.³⁵ In general, these are inferences about who is reborn as what, and why. It is startling how different these inferences are from dialogue to dialogue. The *Timaeus*, for instance, says nothing about being reborn as a human being with a particular kind of life, but a soul can be embodied as a man, woman, bird, land animal, or shellfish. In the *Phaedo* there is, similarly, nothing about being reborn as a certain type of human, not even a man or woman specifically, and the "rungs," so to speak, are: donkeys and similar animals; wolves, hawks, and kites; and bees, wasps, and ants, on the highest rung below human beings, which is reserved for those who practice virtue as a matter of habit without knowledge. *Timaeus* does not mention insect life at all, and he would balk at the thought of placing birds on the same level as wolves.³⁶ The *Republic*, on the other hand, allows souls to be embodied as swans,

³¹ *Timaeus* 76d–e.

³² Plato also considers humans as part of a general zoology in the *Statesman* (266c–d)

³³ *Timaeus* 92a.

³⁴ *Phaedo* 81e.

³⁵ *Phaedrus* 249b–c.

³⁶ *Timaeus* could be referring to worms at *Timaeus* 92a when he talks about animals that do not have feet and have to crawl on the ground. He could also be referring to snakes or to both snakes and worms.

eagles, male athletes, tyrants who eat their own children, and private individuals who focus on their own work.³⁷ This dialogue pushes back on the *Phaedo's* view that practicing virtue merely habitually guarantees a good (but not great) afterlife: It is, after all, a habitually virtuous person who chooses, in the myth of Er, to be a child-eating tyrant. The *Republic* also does not say a word about escaping from the cycle of reincarnation, whereas the *Phaedo* testifies that “those who have purified themselves sufficiently through philosophy live altogether without a body.”³⁸ Meanwhile, the *Timaeus* promises that those who live well will return to dwell with the stars.³⁹ In this light, it seems crude to speak of a theory of reincarnation, instead of *theories* of reincarnation.

There is so much variety in Plato's thought on this issue that it does not seem plausibly attributable to his own (putative) development as a thinker. He would have to change his mind on every occasion for that explanation to work. On the contrary, I think the variation in his thought shows that he simply does not know what determines a person's rebirth. We shall return to the question of escaping the cycle of reincarnation more thoroughly in the final section below, but when Plato says that the unintelligent are reborn as shellfish, we might uncharitably call this guessing. The more charitable perspective is that Plato is doing what one does within a teleological worldview. Saying that the unintelligent are reborn as shellfish is not different in kind from inferring that the gods intended our hair as portable shade to keep us cool in the summer.⁴⁰ We infer what the gods intended from our observations of what things do. Plants do protect us from dangerous winds, and Plato, who takes himself to have shown that the world is carefully managed by a good, intelligent being, makes sense of this in a way that is consistent with the teleology that he has demonstrated: Plants are intended to protect us.⁴¹ Similarly, insects are gentle and cooperative, so in the *Phaedo* he says that insects are the second best things to be reborn as.⁴² We need some kind of explanation for insect life (and its features), and we need some kind of working out of the commitments that entail

³⁷ *Republic* 10.619b–20d.

³⁸ *Phaedo* 114c.

³⁹ *Timaeus* 42b.

⁴⁰ *Timaeus* 76c–d.

⁴¹ Plants shelter our bodies from an onslaught of fire and air that would otherwise quickly reduce our lifespan (*Timaeus* 77a–b).

⁴² *Phaedo* 82b.

reincarnation, as we shall see momentarily. The best explanation is that insects house the souls of those who behaved well and gently but not with knowledge. Yet Plato cannot be certain of what will earn any particular reincarnation; consequently, there is a lot of flip-flopping throughout the dialogues.

On this score, I extend an olive branch to those who argue that eschatology is philosophically inaccessible.⁴³ Plato does the best he can: He explains the coming-to-be of shellfish in terms of profoundly unintelligent people because observations of shellfish reveal that they are profoundly unintelligent animals. The inferences are not always so cut and dried, however: Birds soar closer to the heavenly bodies, so perhaps being reborn as one reflects that we studied the cosmos (although not well enough to be a human).⁴⁴ Perhaps the relevant consideration is that hawks are unjust and love to steal, in which case the unjust are reborn as hawks.⁴⁵ There is no basis for deductive inferences, and in this sense, eschatology is philosophically inaccessible. However, being philosophically inaccessible does not entail being confined to the domain of mythology, and in this respect I differ from those who talk about philosophical inaccessibility: The inferences here appear outside of myths, such as in the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus*.

II

The System of Reincarnation. The *Timaeus's* psychology demands a belief in reincarnation. The system in this dialogue is similar in many ways to the system in other dialogues. In each case Plato's eschatology is determined by the fact that the soul is immortal, and that virtue is rewarded and vice punished. In the *Timaeus*, however, the conception of rewards and punishments is striking, and it represents an improvement in Plato's thinking. Lurking in the background is the view that the soul's proper activity—what it does itself according to itself, separated from the body—is contemplation of the forms. Other dialogues present the soul as disembodied but still being punished

⁴³ See n. 3 above.

⁴⁴ *Timaeus* 90d–e.

⁴⁵ *Phaedo* 82a.

before being reincarnated, but the *Timaeus* presents the punishment as identical to the reincarnation. Let us walk through the commitments underlying the eschatology, focusing especially but not exclusively on the *Timaeus*.

The immortality of the soul is one of the pillars of Plato's philosophy.⁴⁶ Its importance to Plato is captured by the diversity of the arguments he presents in support of the view that the soul is immortal. Due to its immortality, the soul will have an afterlife, and it will not be the afterlife of the Homeric shadelike soul.⁴⁷ Cebes in the *Phaedo* asks Socrates to show specifically "that after the man has died the soul still exists and has some power [*dunamin*] and wisdom [*phronēsin*]." ⁴⁸ Merely showing that the soul exists after death would be an accomplishment, but it would not rule out the shadelike afterlife. The *Phaedrus's* argument and all of the arguments in the *Phaedo*, except for the cyclical argument, show that the soul has activity or intelligence apart from the body: In the *Phaedo's* final argument, the activity is living; in the *Phaedrus's* argument, it is self-moving; and in the *Phaedo's* recollection and affinity arguments, it is awareness or cognition of the forms. The *Republic's* argument infers the soul's immortality from its indestructibility, after inferring its indestructibility from the fact that its own peculiar evil cannot destroy it, and the letter of the argument is indeed consistent with the shadelike afterlife. However, the myth of Er that follows it testifies to the richness of the afterlife.

The myth of Er also discloses an important fact about the afterlife: What comes after death will reward those who lived well in this life.⁴⁹ In the *Republic*, the thought is that we cannot properly weigh the value of virtue unless we account for what virtue contributes to our soul's fate after death. Plato thus compares the unjust person to a runner who sprints at the start of a race: He appears to do well for the first bit but looks ridiculous by the end. In contrast, just people might appear to be

⁴⁶ I am borrowing the phrase from Francis Cornford, *The Republic of Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), xxv.

⁴⁷ See Jan Bremmer, *The Soul in Early Greek Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983) for more on the early Greek conception of the soul.

⁴⁸ *Phaedo* 70b.

⁴⁹ I do not mean that merely performing virtuous actions, or even having virtuous habits, will be rewarded. Plato gives an example of someone who has good habits but chooses a bad reincarnation at *Republic* 10.619c.

worse off at the start of the race, but their sustainable pace comes through for them in the end.⁵⁰ Along these lines, some commentators have presented the soul's fate as a natural consequence of how we live.⁵¹ That makes good sense with the myth of Er: When faced with the choice of which life to live, those who choose well reliably will be those with knowledge, so there is a good reason to cultivate that knowledge in our present lives. On the other hand, if we value honors in this life instead, we might well choose, like Atalanta, the life that guarantees us honors. However, we must find a place for the gods in this system. Of course, the specifics of our next life depend on us, not on god—for Plato says: "The one who chooses is responsible; the god is blameless."⁵² Yet the system by which we are held responsible is one clearly set up by the gods.⁵³ After all, no human being could have devised this system. The *Republic* presents the myth of Er as a study in how the gods reward us.⁵⁴ The *Timaeus* makes this even clearer: It is specifically the gods who cause the most unintelligent people to become shellfish,⁵⁵ and so long as we do not blame the gods for causing these people to be so unintelligent in the first place, the gods keep their hands clean. The point is that reincarnation is inseparable in Plato's view from a theistic worldview where the gods ensure that virtue is rewarded. Specifically, the reward in the *Timaeus* for living justly (*dike[i] biōsointo*) is to be with a star and live a life that is congenial to our character,⁵⁶ thus ensuring a more fortunate kind of moral fit than between an unintelligent person and a shellfish.

An important difference between the *Timaeus's* eschatology and the afterlife as it is depicted elsewhere in the corpus is that the reward and punishment in the former *is* the reincarnation, whereas in the latter

⁵⁰ *Republic* 10.613b–c.

⁵¹ See most notably Kamtekar, "(After-)Life," 2, who argues that "a person's reincarnation is a natural consequence of her vice or virtue."

⁵² *Republic* 10.617e.

⁵³ If we wanted to push back against Plato on this point, we would have to engage with the arguments of *Laws* 10 that the universe is governed by intelligence (and not an evil one at that).

⁵⁴ *Republic* 10.613e–14a.

⁵⁵ *Timaeus* 92b.

⁵⁶ *Timaeus* 42a–b.

the reward and punishment take place before the reincarnation.⁵⁷ This completes Plato's motivation for believing in reincarnation: In the *Timaeus*, the only way to punish a soul is to embody it. Being in hell or spending time in Hades would require that our souls be disembodied but still in some undesirable condition. Plato's psychology lacks the resources to explain how a disembodied soul could fail to be contemplating the forms. We know from the *Phaedo* that the soul itself by itself understands the forms,⁵⁸ but the *Timaeus* represents the moment in Plato's thinking where there is no longer a stage of disembodiment during which we are punished. Reincarnation is an important solution to the problem of explaining how disembodied punishment makes sense: Bad souls do not contemplate the forms because they are never disembodied; they go from one body to the next. However, the eschatology as it is presented in other dialogues does have disembodied souls, who are neither contemplating the forms nor well off.

The myth at the end of the *Phaedo*, for instance, distinguishes between the reward-and-punishment phase and being reincarnated, with the worst of us—called “the incurables”—never having the opportunity to be reborn.⁵⁹ Those who are curable are thrown into Tartarus for a year.⁶⁰ If a soul, when itself by itself and separate from the body, contemplates the forms, then it is not clear why a disembodied soul at the bottom of Tartarus would not be contemplating. Plato, earlier in the *Phaedo*, presents a compelling account of the afterlife that is consistent with his psychology: Only souls that are pure upon death are permanently disembodied and contemplate the forms; impure souls are embodied again. It is for this reason that Julia Annas argues that Plato has failed to successfully combine the reward-and-punishment aspect of his eschatology with the reincarnation aspect, whereas he should have said simply that the reincarnation is the punishment.⁶¹ This

⁵⁷ Kamtekar, “(After-)Life,” provides an insightful study of Plato's eschatology as it varies from dialogue to dialogue, and she discusses this difference between the *Timaeus* and the earlier dialogues there, as well.

⁵⁸ *Phaedo* 82e–83c, for instance.

⁵⁹ *Phaedo* 113d–e.

⁶⁰ *Phaedo* 114a.

⁶¹ Annas says that the *Phaedo* “leads us to expect that reward and punishment after death will consist in appropriate reincarnations. But in fact this idea has not been grafted successfully on to the basic judgement myth. The

explanation in terms of purity is inconsistent with there being impure souls in Tartarus.⁶²

In the *Gorgias*, too, there is “pain and suffering [*algēdonōn kai odunōn*]” even in Hades.⁶³ Indeed, the myth talks about people undergoing the appropriate pains but does not identify the pains in question.⁶⁴ The closest he comes is when he says that some people will benefit from seeing the incurable people undergo “the greatest, the most painful, and the most fearsome suffering forever, simply hanging there imprisoned in Hades as examples.”⁶⁵ It is unclear whether this passage is saying that the greatest punishment is being strung up in Hades or whether they are undergoing the greatest, unidentified suffering while hanging there. If it is the former, we should also ask what would make it the greatest suffering. The *Republic* might help. People there undergo a reward-or-punishment phase before the choice of lives. The punishment is experienced in the afterlife, therefore, and that means it is done without a body:

For every unjust thing they had ever done and for each person they had wronged, they paid the penalty ten times over, measured in a period of one-hundred years. On the grounds that this is the length of a human life, they paid for each injustice tenfold. For example, if some of them had been responsible for many deaths, either by betraying cities or armies, and throwing them into slavery or by

development of the judgement idea, in fact, becomes very unclear in this myth. We begin with souls going to Hades and returning after appropriate treatment, in a context that strongly suggests that the punishment is the reincarnation attaching soul to a new body. But then we move on to the cosmologically transposed version of the judgement myth, and find quite a different set of ideas: now souls are judged and then rewarded or punished not in another life here but in the afterlife there, not by appropriate reincarnation but more traditionally, by torture in hell or bliss in heaven. No way is offered, in the *Phaedo*, to reconcile these different sets of ideas; we must conclude, I think, that reincarnation and the final judgement myth have not been successfully combined.” Annas, “Myths of Judgment,” 127.

⁶² The souls in Tartarus are eventually reincarnated, but the punishment is said to be the time spent in Tartarus (*Phaedo* 114b), and Plato cannot explain why the time in Tartarus is not spent contemplating, since the soul is disembodied. We might think (as does David Sedley, *Creation and Its Critics in Antiquity* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007], 94) that the experience in Tartarus purifies us, but this does not resolve the inconsistency with Plato's psychology.

⁶³ *Gorgias* 525b.

⁶⁴ *Gorgias* 526c, for instance.

⁶⁵ *Gorgias* 525c.

participating in other wrongdoing, they had to receive in return ten times the pain [*algēdonas*] for each injustice.⁶⁶

Plato talks again about suffering pain in a disembodied state, but this passage makes it clearer that the punishment is the time that is being added to our sentence. Each injustice adds another century.⁶⁷ We see the same idea in the *Phaedrus*, according to which we are judged, spend at least a thousand years below the earth, and then come up in time to be reborn.⁶⁸

This poses some real problems for Plato. Firstly, as I said, his psychology is such that one would predict that disembodied souls contemplate the forms. Second, if the punishment is the delay before being born again, it seems that being reincarnated would be a good thing for souls, of which they are being deprived by means of the delay. Meanwhile, the incurables would miraculously escape the cycle of reincarnation altogether. However, the *Timaeus* represents an improvement in Plato's eschatology because it avoids these problems. In the previous section, I argued that it is a part of Plato's natural philosophy; now, we can connect it to his psychology overall and see that he is, in fact, solving problems here. *Timaeus* 90e–92c presents a picture of reincarnation without any of the problems: There is no delay, no mention of incurables who escape the cycle forever, and reincarnation is the one (and apparently only) punishment we undergo.⁶⁹

In all four dialogues with a distinct reward-and-punishment phase, the worst people are depicted as suffering deep below the earth (that is,

⁶⁶ *Republic* 10.615a–b.

⁶⁷ Keep in mind Ardiaeus, who, according to the myth of Er, was so vicious that he was not allowed to go to the choice-of-lives stage. He was like one of the *Gorgias's* incurables.

⁶⁸ *Phaedrus* 249a–b.

⁶⁹ The people who become shellfish in the *Timaeus* are said to be “receiving their just penalty” (92b). In the *Phaedo*, people who live badly are “imprisoned [*endountai*]” in a body (81e), which also employs the language of punishment. We might wonder just what to make of the fact that *Timaeus* 90e–92c and *Phaedo* 81b–82d are not myths, and they both collapse the reward-and-punishment phase into the reincarnation phase, do not mention incurables, and feature no delay between death and reincarnation. It could be that Plato never intended certain of these aspects of the myths to be literally true, but that strains credulity in view of the fact that they recur so consistently across the myths.

in Tartarus or, in the *Phaedrus*, just under the earth). The *Timaeus* preserves the spatial dimension but not the distinct phase: The gods “thrust these people into water to breathe in the muddy depths . . . [because the] penalty for extreme stupidity is the extreme dwelling place.”⁷⁰ The punishment—the reincarnation—is taking place in the depths.

The above commitments lead Plato to develop a system of reincarnation: There is no way for immortal souls to be punished other than to be in a body, and God’s careful control of the world ensures that vicious souls must be punished.

III

Cosmic Perfection and the Possibility of Escape. Plato develops the view that reincarnation is a tool that gods possess in order to secure the perfection of the cosmos. Our first incarnation was due only to the need that the lower gods perceived to create humanity, not as a punishment at all. The *Laws* advances this thought and presents reincarnation as the way that the gods ensure that virtue is victorious over vice in the cosmos. First, the Athenian affirms that the gods who supervise the cosmos do not neglect even the smallest details of the cosmos and that they are interested primarily in promoting virtue.⁷¹ Second, the Athenian argues that these gods are akin to *ptetteia* players, treating souls and bodies as the pieces, and they do nothing but move souls from a better or worse place (*topos*) as their character warrants.⁷² Souls are joined (*suntetagmenē*) to different bodies at different times, and the gods use this to achieve the victory of virtue.⁷³ Plato explains that:

[t]he god saw all this and contrived a place for each part such that virtue would be victorious and vice defeated throughout the whole cosmos as easily and excellently [*arista*] as possible. With this aim in mind, he contrived which place in which regions which type of soul

⁷⁰ *Timaeus* 92b.

⁷¹ *Laws* 10.903b–d.

⁷² *Laws* 10.903d–e. Richard F. Stalley argues that the idea is that bad people will be put in the same location as other bad people and therefore suffer their company. Richard F. Stalley, *An Introduction to Plato's Laws* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 177.

⁷³ *Laws* 10.903d.

should dwell in accordance with its character, but he left the causes of the coming-to-be of each kind of transformation to the wills [*boulēsesin*] of each soul.⁷⁴

This presentation of reincarnation combines the idea that virtue is rewarded and vice punished for the individual with the idea that reincarnation ensures the perfection of the cosmos: “The universe has been ordered by the one who takes care of it with a view to the preservation [*sōtērian*] and virtue [*aretēn*] of the whole.”⁷⁵ Ensuring that each part goes to its proper place is how virtue in the whole cosmos is achieved. This passage is the crucial point in the Athenian’s argument that vicious people are inescapably punished. He concludes that whether you make yourself small and hidden in the ocean or fly high above the earth, “you shall pay the proper penalty [*timōria*].”⁷⁶

The use of the word *timōria* here is worth reflecting on. Earlier in the *Laws*, Plato distinguishes between *dikē* and *timōria*: While both are forms of punishments or penalties, the former is said to always be something noble (*kalon*), whereas the latter is merely suffering that follows an injustice.⁷⁷ Being met with *timōria* leaves a wrongdoer uncured, whereas *dikē* is rehabilitative. It is important that a bad reincarnation is called *timōria*. Firstly, it reflects that being reincarnated is not good for a person: This system is implemented for the sake of the cosmos. The shift from a distinct reward-and-punishment phase in the afterlife to identifying reincarnation as the punishment is coincident with a shift to prioritizing the cosmos over the good for a soul. The gods do not do things for the sake of humanity ultimately; for the whole does not exist for the sake of a part, and we are a mere part of the cosmos. Secondly, we acquire the body of an animal ourselves by choosing the life that warrants it. Divine punishment is divine in the sense that the system is designed by the gods, but we bring it about ourselves. To call this a *dikē* is to make the same mistake as those whom the Athenian criticizes for saying that wrongdoing is its own *dikē*: Since wrongdoing

⁷⁴ *Laws* 10.904b–c.

⁷⁵ *Laws* 10.903b. Robert Mayhew, *Plato: Laws 10* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 179, says that “this relocation of souls to the places they deserve to be is what it is for virtue to be victorious in the universe; this is what the good of the whole universe consists in.”

⁷⁶ *Laws* 10.905a.

⁷⁷ *Laws* 5.728a–c. For this reason, *timōria* is often translated as “retribution.” See Kamtekar, “(After-)Life,” as an example.

does not make a person better off, the suffering we inflict on ourselves by wrongdoing is best understood as a *timōria*.⁷⁸ Inevitable, natural consequences of wrongdoing are *timōriai*, in which case it is right for Plato to call bad reincarnations *timōriai* in the *Laws*.⁷⁹ For the *Timaeus* and *Laws* make bad reincarnations a consequence of our vice that follows it almost as a law of nature.⁸⁰ This distinction is novel to the *Laws*, and his calling reincarnations a *timōria* solves the important problem that reincarnations do not improve the soul. The view that reincarnations are a *dikē*, which we find in the dialogues before the *Laws*—for instance, at *Timaeus* 92b—does not square with the *Gorgias*'s claim that punishment is rehabilitative. Plato's new category of sufferings that naturally and inevitably follow vice, but do not cure it, accommodates this, and makes it superfluous to have a distinct reward-and-punishment phase before the reincarnation.

If the perfection of the cosmos depends on reincarnation, then it is unclear whether it is possible for anyone to escape the cycle of reincarnation, especially if there are a fixed number of souls. The dialogues say different things about this. The *Republic* does not mention the possibility of escaping at all.⁸¹ The *Phaedo* first says that a soul that

⁷⁸ *Laws* 5.728b–c. The context at the start of *Laws* 5 is a discussion of how to honor the soul by improving it, rather than dishonoring it by valuing things such as life and beauty more highly (727a–28a). At this point in the discussion, the Athenian is claiming that the greatest penalty of wrongdoing is that our soul becomes worse, and he is arguing that the penalty is *timōria*, not *dikē*.

⁷⁹ *Laws* 10.905a. There is debate about whether bad reincarnations in the *Laws* really are *timōriai*. Kamtekar argues that they must be *dikē* because, otherwise, “punishment by the gods is not something fine, [and] the gods are the cause of something bad.” Kamtekar, “(After-)Life,” 15 n. 36. However, Plato calls it a *timōria* at 905a. Moreover, the gods are not the cause of something bad; we are the cause of the bad transformations since the gods left it up to us. The causes are identified as our wills (904c), and we find similar passages in the *Republic* (10.617e) and *Timaeus* (42e). Further, bad reincarnations are not fine (*kalon*) for us, but they are fine for the cosmos overall, whose perfection depends on vicious people being punished. This calls to mind the lot of the philosopher-rulers in the *Republic*, for whom ruling is not something fine, even though it is fine for the city. See Trevor Saunders, *Plato's Penal Code* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 207, for a longer discussion of whether divine punishment counts as a *timōria* or a *dikē*.

⁸⁰ See *Phaedo* 81b–82d.

⁸¹ However, it is consistent with that possibility. For the myth of Er is not meant to be complete: The fates of the stillborn and short-lived are left out, and the reader is told that there are even “greater consequences for piety and impiety towards the gods and parents and for suicide” (615c). Plato then

has been sufficiently purified of its connection with the body through philosophy will “in truth spend the rest of time with the gods.”⁸² Later, we learn too that this existence is nonbodily, for Plato says that the souls of good people “live without bodies [*aneu somatōn*].”⁸³ The *Phaedo*, therefore, testifies to an escape that is permanent and nonbodily. The *Phaedrus* similarly allows for a permanent coexistence with the gods: “[I]f some soul, while accompanying a god, sees any true thing, it will be unhurt until the next circuit; and if it can do this forever [*aei*], it will never be harmed.”⁸⁴ So, it is possible for the soul to always exist in this disembodied state; it is just a matter of keeping up with the gods as they complete the heavenly circuits. While embodied, we can improve our incarnations through acting virtuously.⁸⁵ The *Phaedrus* is unique in that it says we can escape the cycle only through living philosophically three times in a row.⁸⁶ Once we have escaped, we can presumably make the escape permanent by, again, keeping up with the gods. The *Timaeus*, lastly, says that “if a man lived well during the due course of his time, then he would return to his native star [*oikēsīn astrou*] and live a happy life that is congenial to his character.”⁸⁷ On the other hand, if we live badly, then we are reincarnated as, say, a woman or an animal.⁸⁸ The *Timaeus* is silent regarding whether the escape is permanent; it might be that we are embodied as our native star, in which case the escape is different from the *Phaedo*’s and *Phaedrus*’s disembodied state.

Commentators have struggled to figure out exactly what Plato means when he discusses our soul’s native star. There is not much help

proceeds to give an example, Ardiaeus, who was impious and killed his father and brother; as a penalty, he is not even allowed to go to the choice of lives. The reader never learns what is the *reward* for piety.

⁸² *Phaedo* 81a.

⁸³ *Phaedo* 114c.

⁸⁴ *Phaedo* 248c.

⁸⁵ *Phaedrus* 248e–49a.

⁸⁶ *Phaedrus* 249a.

⁸⁷ *Timaeus* 42b. The talk about “native stars” reflects the fact that each soul is assigned its own star at the time of its creation (41d–e). Moreover, each soul seems to have originally resided (*oikeō*) with its star, hence the term *oikēsīn astrou*. The term might also be related to *oikeion* (“appropriate”) because the life we have when we return to our native star is one that is meant to be appropriate to our character (41e).

⁸⁸ *Timaeus* 42b–d; 90e–92c.

in the text, besides the claim that the Demiurge created the same number of souls and stars and then assigned each soul to a star.⁸⁹ Our native star is presumably the star that was paired with our soul at the moment of its creation. Its place in Plato's eschatology is deeply puzzling. Let us put aside for the moment the fact that the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus* testify to a disincarnate eschatology. There is nothing in Plato's psychology that rules out being embodied in a star. The world itself has a soul, after all. It seems that the human body harms one's soul only because it was made by the deficient lower gods. A soul might be able to experience the full range of cognition of the forms while housed in a body made by the Demiurge, just as the embodied world-soul can, in which case the afterlife could be bodily but intellectually perfect.

However, there are other problems with this suggestion. Alfred E. Taylor correctly points out that stars already have souls.⁹⁰ The Demiurge has made these earlier in the process, and they are responsible for the everlasting motion of the stars. Erik Ostenfeld replies by floating the possibility of the "double animation" of stars.⁹¹ Francis Cornford says that here "the veil of myth grows thicker again, and it is useless to discuss problems that would arise only if the statements were meant literally."⁹²

We can solve these problems by adopting the view that we are not embodied as stars. Stars already have souls, and the talk about double animation is needlessly complicated. Instead, the soul goes to be *with* the stars. This view also has the benefit of bringing the *Timaeus* in line with the picture of the *Phaedrus* and the *Phaedo*: The soul is still disembodied, even though it is with corporeal things. Cornford's suggestion that this is mythical overlooks that Plato is answering the important question of where souls go when they are separated from a body. Recently, scholars have argued that Plato believes the soul is located in space.⁹³ Most of the evidence for this claim is found in the

⁸⁹ *Timaeus* 41d–e.

⁹⁰ Alfred E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1928), 257.

⁹¹ Erik Ostenfeld, *Forms, Matter, Mind: Three Strands in Plato's Metaphysics* (The Hague: Martinus Nuhoff Publishers, 1982), 254.

⁹² Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, 143.

⁹³ See especially Gabriela Roxana Carone, "Mind and Body in Plato," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 87, no. 3 (2005): 227–69; and Douglas R. Campbell, "Located in Space: Plato's Theory of Psychic Motion," *Ancient*

Timaeus. If this is right, then, of course, it would occur to him to ask in this dialogue where the soul is when it does not have a body. The answer is that it is with its native star.

This also fills out the view that we saw in the *Laws*, that the gods move souls around from one place (*topos*) to another in accordance with their character.⁹⁴ This congeniality to one's character is also how Plato describes the afterlife we spend with our star in the *Timaeus*.⁹⁵ There will always be souls in the cosmos, and they will always be in the appropriate place.⁹⁶

One might be concerned that the possibility of escape would mean that, at some point, there will not be all the kinds of living things in the Intelligible Living Thing instantiated in the visible world. However, there need not be every kind of living thing at every moment.⁹⁷ After all, the lower gods create nonhuman animals from deceased humans, and if

Philosophy (forthcoming); as well as David Sedley, "The Ideal of Godlikeness," in *Oxford Readings in Philosophy: Plato*, vol. 2, ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 309–29.

⁹⁴ *Laws* 10.903d–e.

⁹⁵ *Timaeus* 42a–b.

⁹⁶ In the *Republic*, Plato says that "if it is the case [that the soul is immortal], then you realize that there must always be the same souls. For there cannot be made fewer when none is destroyed, and neither could there be made more: for if there are made more of immortal things, you know that they would have to come from the mortal, and then everything would end up becoming immortal" (10.611a). The view that I develop here—namely, that souls never leave the cosmos, but are merely moved around—is consistent with this.

⁹⁷ Plato cannot mean, when saying that the world needs to have as many kinds of animals as possible to best resemble the Intelligible Living Thing, that those kinds of animals always exist (*Timaeus* 30c–31a). The theory of reincarnation makes it easy for any one species to not exist at any moment. For example, Plato's system does not prevent each human being alive right now from acting so viciously that nobody is reborn as a human. The same goes for hawks, monkeys, wolves, and any other kind of animal. Plato's cosmos is indeed one that can be emptied of any species, including all humans and animals. This is not something to lament or be worried about. Yet there is a large problem with the theory of reincarnation looming around the corner: If, say, hawks go extinct because nobody behaves in a way that earns him rebirth as a hawk, then it is not possible for the species to just reappear when people start meriting rebirth as a hawk, since there would not be any members of the species at that time to begin the repopulation. Now, Plato does sometimes say that evil cannot be eliminated from the world (for instance, *Theaetetus* 176a), and maybe the same goes for specific vices (for example, there will always be thieves, so there will always be hawks). Even if so, he never explains what guarantees this.

everyone is virtuous, there will again be a time without nonhuman animals.⁹⁸ The cosmos is perfect because it did once house every kind of living thing and because it is such that if someone lives badly, then that person will get what he or she deserves.

Our union to our body completes the cosmos. This is important not for our own happiness, to which it is, in fact, detrimental, but for the perfection of the cosmos as it comes to further resemble the Intelligible Living Thing. The system of reincarnation plays an important role in that process, as souls are guided to this body or that body by the framework that the gods set out in accordance with their moral character. It is precisely this fact that ensures that virtue is victorious over vice in the cosmos.

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⁹⁸ There is and has been since antiquity debate about whether escape from the cycle of reincarnation is permanent, in which case the cosmos would be emptied of humans and other animals permanently. Three such attempts are: Ostenfeld, *Three Strands*; Andrew S. Mason, "Immortality in Plato's *Timaeus*," *Phronesis* 39, no. 1 (1994): 90–97; and James V. Robinson, "The Tripartite Soul in the *Timaeus*," *Phronesis* 35, no. 1 (1990): 103–10. Proclus argues that we would voluntarily return to the earth: "This very topic should be investigated from the very beginning, why it is that the soul comes down into bodies. It is because it wants to imitate the providential care of the gods, and it enters into generation on this account, abandoning contemplation. For, given that divine perfection is of two kinds, the one intellective, and the other providential, the former involving rest and the latter motion, their static, intellective, and undeviating nature is reflected through the [soul's] contemplation, while their providential and motive [power is reflected] in its generation-working life" (*in Tim V* 324.5–12; trans. Tarrant). Mason defends this view too, although without a mention of Proclus: "[T]he soul in the *Timaeus* has a purpose to fulfil within the world, which it willingly undertakes; but the fulfilment of that purpose is a burden, and the soul may legitimately aspire to escape to a heavenly life of contemplation." Mason, "Immortality," 9. The only possible explanation that Plato could countenance for a soul returning to the cosmos would be that it is a voluntary undertaking, as I see it: A soul will not be vicious when it is with its star, in which case it cannot do anything that would merit a transformation to a lower station.