International Philosophical Quarterly
doi:
Online First:

# Evil, Demiurgy, and the Taming of Necessity in Plato's *Timaeus*

***Casey Hall and Elizabeth Jelinek***

ABSTRACT: Plato's *Timaeus* reveals a cosmos governed by Necessity and Intellect; commentators have debated the relationship between them. Non-literalists hold that the demiurge (Intellect), having *carte blanche* in taming Necessity, is omnipotent. But this omnipotence, alongside the attributes of benevolence and omniscience, creates problems when non-literalists address the problem of evil. We take the demiurge rather as limited by Necessity. This position is supported by episodes within the text, and by its larger consonance with Plato's philosophy of evil and responsibility. By recognizing the analogy between man and demiurge, the literal reading provides a moral component that its non-literal counterpart lacks.

TIMAEUS, IN THE PLATONIC DIALOGUE NAMED after him, describes our cosmos as the work of a demiurge (δημιουργὸς), a supremely intelligent and supremely benevolent deity whose every action is driven by his desire to maximize goodness. Upon discovering a visible realm in the throes of chaotic motion, the demiurge imposes order upon it (Plat., *Tim.* 30a1–9). Timaeus later complicates the story when he reveals to us that the demiurge is not the only force operating in the cosmos. The cosmos is "of mixed birth"; it is the "offspring" of Intellect (νοῦς), personified by the demiurge, and Necessity (ἀνάγκη), the personification of natural forces (Plat., *Tim.* 48a1–2).[1]

What is the extent of Necessity's power? If we take Timaeus's descriptions of Necessity at face value (hereafter the "literal reading"), we understand Necessity as being capable of limiting the demiurge's craftsmanship. It follows that the demiurge does not have complete power over the visible realm but is restricted by Necessity much as a human craftsman is limited by the nature of the materials with which he has to work.

But many scholars dismiss references to Necessity as metaphorical and claim that the demiurge is unrestricted by Necessity; he has *carte blanche* in designing and controlling the natural world at every level.[2]

[1]Translations of the *Timaeus* are either by Zeyl or Bury, depending on which is consistent with the terminology in the relevant section. For simplicity's sake, assume the Zeyl translation unless otherwise indicated. For Zeyl, see: Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 2000). For Bury, see: Plato, *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1929).

[2]The demiurge is not, strictly speaking, omnipotent. He does not create or control the Forms. Within the realm of becoming, however, the demiurge could be interpreted as an all-powerful creator-god (as non-literalists claim) or as a divinity whose power is limited by the constraints of Necessity (as literalists hold).

If the demiurge is the all-powerful creator of the visible realm, he is ultimately responsible for everything in it, including phenomena that are evil. This is clearly at odds with the Platonic thesis that the demiurge is only capable of causing good things (Plat., *Rep.* 380c6–8; *Tim.* 29e2–30b1). Non-literalists are thus faced with a Timaean version of the problem of evil and must offer a theodicy reconciling the contradictory coexistence of evil in a world controlled by an all-powerful benevolent demiurge.[3]

In Part One of this paper, we show that the non-literalists' attempts at attributing a coherent theodicy to Plato fail. We argue that the problems we identify are egregious enough to give us reason to doubt the tenability of a non-literal reading of Necessity and offer us sufficient grounds for rejecting the thesis that the demiurge is the all-powerful creator of everything that has come to be. In Part Two, we offer positive reasons to prefer the literal reading of Necessity over the non-literal reading. On the literal reading, the *Timaeus* account provides readers with a model for coping with the human condition; by contrast, the non-literal reading is unable to offer such moral guidance.

## 1. AGAINST THE NON-LITERAL INTERPRETATION

### *1.1 The Rationale for the Literal Reading*[4]

At 30a 1–9 and 52d3–53e1 we learn that the demiurge does not create *ex nihilo*, but crafts the cosmos out of a disorderly mess of pre-existing materials resembling the four elements. On the literal reading of the passage, the pre-elements were not created by the demiurge; they exist prior to and independent of the demiurge's crafting (Plat., *Tim.* 49b–57c). Literalists argue that these pre-elements are products of Necessity, and ontologically robust enough to have properties of their own—properties the demiurge did not invent.[5] Thus, the pre-elements have determinate natures that the demiurge is powerless to change, and that endure in their cosmic form.

Timaeus explicitly says that Necessity can limit the demiurge's craftsmanship: "Intellect prevailed over Necessity by persuading it to direct most (πλεῖστα) of the things that come to be toward what is best" (Plat., *Tim.* 48a). According to literalists, that Intellect can persuade Necessity "most" but not all of the time suggests that Necessity is a causal force capable, on occasion, of constraining the demiurge's craftsmanship. This interpretation is confirmed in the passage describing the fashioning of the four elements, where the demiurge perfected them only "to the degree (ὅπῃπερ) that Necessity was willing to comply obediently" (Plat., *Tim.* 56c8). Again, in the account of the construction of the human head, Timaeus

[3]While the term "theodicy" wasn't coined until 1710, it is apt in the present context; derived from θεός (god) and δική (trial, judgment), a theodicy is literally a defense of god's justice. Such a defense is necessary here if one both acknowledges the presence of evil in the cosmos and insists that the demiurge is benevolent and omnipotent.

[4]We recognize there are a plethora of interpretive difficulties one must resolve before one can offer a comprehensive defense of the literal reading of Necessity. It is not our aim here to offer such a comprehensive defense; rather, our focus in Part One is to expose the inadequacies of the non-literalists' theodicies.

[5]Elizabeth Jelinek, "Pre-Cosmic Necessity in Plato's *Timaeus*," *Apeiron* 44 (2011): 288.

tells us that the younger gods cannot make the skull both perfectly protective and perfectly responsive because durability and sensitivity "refuse their concomitance" (Plat., *Tim.* 75b5) "as a consequence of Necessity" (Plat., *Tim.* 75b1). The nature of the raw materials available to the gods thwarts their ability to construct the perfect human skull. We discuss such constraints on the demiurge in Part Two; for present purposes, we call attention to the fact that on the literal reading, the gods are powerless to change the elements' natures.

### *1.2 The Rationale for the Non-Literal Reading*

On the non-literal reading the demiurge is not at all limited by Necessity; he has unrestricted power to craft the cosmos in whatever way he deems best. Sedley's non-literalist reading, for example, stems from his assumption that it is un-Platonic to think that matter can constrain divinity. He asks rhetorically:

> Would Plato's theology really allow that the best thing in the universe, god, might on occasion be defeated by the lowliest thing, matter? This is such an un-Platonic thought that very clear evidence would be needed before the point could safely be conceded. I believe that there is none.[6]

Convinced that Plato would never conceive of a universe in which matter has the power to constrain divinity, non-literalists interpret passages in the *Timaeus* accordingly, claiming that the pre-existing matter is unstable and "devoid of determinate characteristics."[7] As Broadie argues, "It would be a patently arbitrary assumption if fire, earth, water, and air, or the cycle of these, were openly granted existential and kinetic self-sufficiency."[8] Given that the pre-elements are causally impotent, the demiurge has *carte blanche* in constructing the four elements.[9]

If the demiurge constructed the four elements, there is no reason to think that the materials that emerge as combinations of these elements could obstruct the demiurge's subsequent efforts at craftsmanship. Thus, Sedley concludes, "there is no reason to think that, under such intelligent persuasion, material necessity causes any unintended disruption" and "nothing appears to tie [the demiurge's] hands in any detrimental way."[10]

Lennox similarly describes the cosmos that emerges as a consequence of the claim that Necessity is causally impotent:

> These passages do not picture a layer of the operations of the world where Necessity is unconstrained [. . .] Precisely, it characterizes a world which, *at every level of*

[6]David Sedley, *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2007), p. 116.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Sarah Broadie, "Fifth-Century Bugbears in the *Timaeus,*" in *Presocratics and Plato: Festschrift at Delphi in Honor of Charles Kahn*, ed. Richard Patterson, Vassilis Karasmanis, and Arnold Hermann (Delphi: Parmenides Publishing, 2013), pp. 233–34.

[9]Sedley, p. 116.

[10]Ibid., pp. 116–17.

> *structure*, is the product of necessary physical interactions ordered and coordinated for the sake of some good (emphasis ours).[11]

Broadie agrees, calling the notion that the "cosmos is through and through the product of divine reason" a "general foundational premise."[12] A. E. Taylor even ascribes the contrary view to "persons who are dull enough to take the personification of ἀνάγκη [Necessity] literally."[13]

### *1.3 What is Plato's Conception of Evil in the Timaeus?*

If the demiurge has unrestricted power over becoming and is absolutely good, why does he allow evil to exist in the cosmos? To reconcile this contradiction, non-literalists must develop a theodicy.

While we have adopted the non-literalists' use of anachronisms such as "problem of evil" and "theodicy," it is important to avoid imposing an anachronistic definition of evil onto Plato. Briefly we may observe that throughout the *Timaeus*, a state of affairs is "godless" if it is disorderly and "good" if it is well-ordered:

> The god wanted everything to be good and nothing to be bad so far as that was possible, and so he took over all that was visible —not at rest but in discordant and disorderly motion —and brought it from a state of disorder to one of order, because he believed that order was in every way better than disorder. (Plat., *Tim.* 30a1–8)

Here order is good and disorder is bad. The demiurge brings about good by bringing about order.

Appropriately, both natural and moral evils are characterized as states of disorderliness. Timaeus emphasizes that disease is a result of disorder: "when each of these substances is produced in this order, health as a rule results; but if in the reverse order, disease" (Plat., *Tim.* 82e1–3).[14] It follows that diseases are evil. Thus, Timaeus tells us, "a body [. . .] which is disproportioned [. . .] causes itself countless evils (κακῶν)" (Plat., *Tim.* 87e2–8).[15]

Order in the soul is likewise necessary for moral goodness. Unfortunately, that orderliness is threatened when the soul is implanted in the human body. The body, "a mass, tumultuous and irrational" (Plat., *Tim.* 42d2),[16] is a vehicle for sense perception, but the intake of sensory data causes "forceful disturbances" in the soul (Plat., *Tim.* 42a8). These disturbances manifest themselves as feelings of pain or pleasure, which in turn trigger emotional reactions. Pain, pleasure, and emotion "mutilate and disfigure" the motions of the Same and the Different that compose

[11]James Lennox, "Plato's Unnatural Teleology," in *Platonic Investigations*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1985), p. 212.

[12]Broadie, "Fifth-Century Bugbears," p. 256.

[13]A. E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's* Timaeus (New York NY: Garland Publishers, 1928/1987), p. 301.

[14]Bury translation.

[15]Bury translation.

[16]Bury translation.

the human soul (Plat., *Tim.* 43e1). If a man succumbs to the affections of the body and fails to use his reason to overcome them, his soul will remain disordered, thus rendering him irrational (Plat., *Tim.* 42b3–d3, 86c5, 87a8). For Plato, moral evil *just is* the failure to be rational (42b3).

Why did the demiurge allow for human bodies to be crafted in such a way so as to make irrationality possible? Why did he allow for our bodily substances to be capable of "waging a destructive and devastating war," resulting in disease (Plat., *Tim.* 83a6)? Literalists call attention to the fact that it is "by virtue of Necessity" that human souls are implanted in bodies (Plat., *Tim.* 42a4), and the forceful disturbances of the soul that the body causes are "results [that] necessarily follow" (Plat., *Tim.* 42a5).[17] Similarly, it is "of Necessity" that humans are susceptible to diseases of the body (Plat., *Tim.* 77a1–3). But these references to Necessity are of no help to non-literalists. If, on their view, the demiurge has the power to override Necessity and thus complete power over the realm of becoming, then why did he allow for moral evil and bodily diseases to exist in the cosmos?

The first theodicean strategy is to claim that "local evil is an integral constituent of overall good."[18] While diseases of the soul and diseases of the body may seem evil to us, on a cosmic level these things all contribute to the greater good. The non-literalists' second strategy is to absolve the demiurge of responsibility for the evils that exist in the cosmos and attribute such responsibility to the younger gods. Let us explicate and respond to each in turn.

### *1.4 The Free Will Argument*

Physical embodiment allows for the possibility of human irrationality and thus degradation into evil. If, as the non-literalists claim, the demiurge is all-powerful, then it follows that the demiurge is ultimately responsible for the fact that embodiment initially causes disorder in the soul. Non-literalists argue that on a cosmic scale such disorder is actually good.[19] On this view, the demiurge allows for man's potential for moral failure, because without this potential, man would not have free will. Man's embodiment offers him the opportunity to choose rational improvement over moral decline.

So disorder in the soul is a necessary condition for the freedom to exercise moral choice. But this assertion is problematic. Is disorder *metaphysically* necessary for moral choice? The demiurge himself harbors no such internal disorder. It follows that the demiurge does not have the freedom to make moral choices. Even more absurd is the additional consequence of this case: If humans have moral freedom but the demiurge does not, then humans have a capability that the demiurge lacks. Humans, in this case, would be more powerful than the demiurge.

Suppose disorder is not metaphysically necessary for moral choice to be possible. Perhaps while humans must be confronted with disorder in order to exercise

[17]Bury translation.

[18]Sedley, pp. 123–24.

[19]Allan Silverman, "Commentary on Sauvé Meyer," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 29 (2014): 70–74. See also Broadie, "Fifth-Century Bugbears," p. 266.

freedom of choice, the demiurge can make moral decisions despite the fact that he has no such disorder. But if it is not a metaphysical necessity that moral choice requires disorder, then why didn't the demiurge create humans such that disorder isn't required for moral choice? The non-literalists might be tempted to point out that disorder is not the demiurge's fault; it is simply the result of embodiment. But if one claims that disorder is the result of embodiment then one is admitting that there are some things that are true of Necessity that the demiurge cannot overpower. This is, of course, precisely the thesis that the non-literalists are trying to deny.

The non-literalists are thus left with a problem: On their interpretation, the demiurge chose to make the disorder that results from the soul's interaction with the body a necessary condition for man's ability to make moral choices. But the demiurge need not have done this. If there is nothing tying the demiurge's hands metaphysically, and he is all-powerful in the realm of becoming, then he has the option of giving man the capacity for moral choice without requiring the initial violence of embodiment. Why would an omnibenevolent all-powerful god require man to suffer needlessly? Without an adequate answer, the non-literalists' free will theodicy falls apart.

### *1.5 The Completeness Argument*

Timaeus tells us that if a man succumbs to the disorder brought about by embodiment and falls into moral depravity, he will degenerate into a wild animal that "resemble[s] the wicked character he had acquired" (Plat., *Tim.* 42c5). Those who are cowardly and unjust transform into women; those who are simple-minded into birds; those who make no effort to study philosophy into land animals; and finally, those who are ignorant and stupid into fish. "Living creatures keep passing into one another in all of these ways, as they undergo transformation by the loss or by the gain of reason and unreason" (Plat., *Tim.* 92c1–5).[20] The man will keep changing into animals of increasing degrees of inferiority until he uses his reason to dominate his body, and "yields himself to the revolution of the Same and Similar that is within him" (Plat., *Tim.* 42d1).[21]

> Even though irrationality is a type of evil, Silverman nonetheless maintains: We need to ascribe to the demiurge responsibility for the presence of these causes of the coming into being of the animals [. . .] Among those causes will be the diseases that result in the failure of humans to master the emotions.[22]

While moral failure might seem inherently evil at first blush, it actually serves the greater good. If the demiurge hadn't allowed for men to possess` the potential for moral failure, then the cosmos would lack the animals into which irrational men degenerate. If there were no ignorant men, then there would be no fish, and if there

[20]Bury translation.

[21]Bury translation.

[22]Silverman, p. 72; see also Sarah Broadie, "Theodicy and Pseudo-History in the *Timaeus,*" *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 21 (2001): 9.

were no fish, then the cosmos would not be complete. The cosmos is good only if it is complete (Plat., *Tim.* 30d2–31a2). Irrationality may seem evil to us, but in fact it is "good" because it contributes to the overall goodness of the cosmos.

Why couldn't an all-powerful demiurge just make a fish? Non-literalists might reply that fish are described as ignorant (therefore evil), and the demiurge can only create good things. But if fish are evil and therefore not the products of demiurgic activity, then fish can't also be good insofar as fish add to the completeness of the cosmos. In other words, if fish serve the greater good, then why couldn't the demiurge have created them? On the other hand, if fish are evil, then how can it be true, as Silverman claims, that fish "have a divine origin"?[23]

Non-literalists might attempt to make sense of the idea that fish are both evil and good by claiming that while fish are "local evils" they are also an "integral constituent of overall good."[24] On the non-literal view, if fish are local evils, then it follows that the demiurge could not have been responsible for their creation. But it is not clear that such a conclusion necessarily follows. Consider a doctor giving a child a vaccine. The shot hurts; it is clearly a "local evil." Nonetheless, since it promotes the child's health and wellbeing, it contributes to the overall good. Suppose the doctor, like the demiurge, can only cause goodness. Given that the shot is part of a greater good, we wouldn't hesitate to attribute responsibility for it to a good-producing doctor, despite the fact that the shot constitutes a local evil. In other words, the shot's greater goodness overrides its local evil, and thus it is not inconsistent to suppose that a doctor who can only produce good could at the same time administer the shot. For these reasons, Silverman's argument from completeness fails.

### *1.6 Diseases of the Body*

Silverman extends his argument to explain why the demiurge would allow for the presence of not just diseases of the soul (i.e., irrationality), but also of the body. He argues that there is "nothing [that] licenses us to think that there is anything evil about diseases," and goes so far as to claim that it is reasonable to suppose that there are Forms for Epilepsy and Bile.[25]

Silverman's suggestion is problematic. When the substances of the body "move through the veins in all directions" and "no longer preserve the order of their natural revolutions," they are described as being "at war also with the established and regular constitution of the body, which they corrupt and dissolve" (Plat., *Tim.* 83a1–8),[26] thereby bringing about a "multiplicity of altered states and an infinity of diseases and degenerations" (Plat., *Tim.* 82b5–7).[27] Epilepsy, for example, results when white phlegm is mixed with black bile and the "mixture is sprayed against the divine circuits of the head, thereby throwing them into confusion" (Plat., *Tim.* 85a2–b5). Diseases of the body arise when the body's orderliness is compromised.

[23] Silverman, p. 72.
[24] Sedley, pp. 123–124.
[25] Silverman, p. 72.
[26] Bury translation
[27] Bury translation

Given that epilepsy is an instance of disorder, and thus evil, how can we take seriously Silverman's suggestion that there is a Form for Epilepsy? Moreover, how could diseases have a "divine origin"?[28] Even if Silverman could come up with an explanation of how bodily diseases contribute to the greater good, his general claim that diseases have a divine origin is ultimately untenable. The demiurge's nature makes it impossible for him to bear responsibility for disease.

The demiurge is a craftsman; as such, his function is to bring about order (Plat., *Gorg.* 503e2–504a6, 506d8–e5). As we established earlier, (1) order is good and disorder is evil (Plat., *Tim.* 30a1–9); and (2) diseases are instances of disorder (Plat., *Tim.* 82a1–b9). From (1) and (2) it follows that (3) diseases are evil (Plat., *Tim.* 83a1–8, 86b8–e5). The demiurge is only capable of bringing about the good (order) (Plat. *Rep.* 380c6–8, *Gorg.* 503e2–504a6*, Tim.* 30a1–9). Given that diseases are evil, then *pace* Silverman, it follows that the demiurge cannot possibly be the origin of diseases.

### *1.7 The Younger Gods*

Perhaps in anticipation of such objections, non-literalists such as Sedley and Silverman point out that the demiurge does not *directly* cause diseases.[29] The evils of disease follow from human embodiment, and the demiurge does not craft the human body but rather tasks the younger gods with this job (Plat., *Tim.* 69c5). Silverman concludes that this "safeguards the demiurge from direct responsibility."[30]

Our first reaction to this move is confusion. Both Sedley and Silverman argue that disease, which is the result of embodiment, is not in fact evil because it contributes to the greater good. If our embodiment is what makes us susceptible to disease, but disease isn't evil, then why can't the demiurge be responsible for crafting the human body? In the same breath, Silverman and Sedley claim that diseases *are* evil, and that is why the demiurge tasks the younger gods with crafting the human body. Which is it? Are diseases evil or are they good?

In the interest of reading Silverman and Sedley as charitably as possible, let us reconsider their claim that while diseases contribute to the greater good, they are nonetheless "local evils," and thus the demiurge cannot directly cause them. We are left with the view that the younger gods are responsible for these local evils. But this means that the younger gods *purposive`ely* made humans susceptible to irrationality so that humans would devolve into lower animals. Unfortunately for Silverman and Sedley, this does not square with the text. The demiurge commands the younger gods to *imitate* his own craftsmanship (Plat., *Tim.* 69c6). Given that the demiurge is compelled to make his creations as rational as possible, the younger gods, if they wish to imitate the demiurge, must also strive to create rational things. Moreover, the demiurge explicitly instructs the younger gods to guide and help humans (Plat., *Tim.* 42e3); and "they who constructed us, remember[ed] the injunction

[28]Silverman, p. 72.
[29]Sedley, pp. 123–24; Silverman, p. 72.
[30]Silverman, p. 72.

of their father, when he enjoined upon them to make the mortal kind as good as they possibly could" (Plat., *Tim.* 71d5–e1).[31] The younger gods cannot have wanted us to have the potential for irrationality and bodily disease and so constructed our bodies in ways that allowed for this.[32]

### *1.8 Natural Disasters*

The non-literalists are no more successful at explaining how an all-powerful and supremely good demiurge could allow for natural disasters such as fires and floods.

Sedley begins by highlighting a passage in which the demiurge persuades fire to contribute to good ends. The demiurge uses fire as part of his design of the human eye; it is fire that allows us to see (Plat., *Tim.* 45b2–46c6). But clearly, not all fire has been "persuaded" in this way. Chaotic fire may result in massive conflagrations that destroy entire civilizations. On the literal reading, chaotic fire is a product of the demiurge's inability to persuade Necessity. Since non-literalists claim that Necessity is causally impotent, they are forced to attribute chaotic fire to the demiurge. Sedley finds this to be unproblematic, "I see no sign that the leeway that permits these elements periodically to run riot was seen by Plato as a failing, oversight, or sign of laziness on the part of cosmic intelligence."[33] Sedley argues that while natural disasters that wipe out entire civilizations may seem evil to us, they are in fact good. This is because, according to many non-literalists, Plato was committed to the idea that civilizations have a finite life cycle much akin to an individual human's, and that civilizations are completely wiped out by natural disasters so that new ones can emerge in their place. For example, Broadie writes:

> In fact, it seems likely that Plato not only did not see the cataclysm as a disaster for the ancient Athenians, but saw it as good fortune. Their city, had it survived, would have lapsed into a degenerate form [. . .] As things were, it lived its finest hour and perished [. . .][34]

The Athenians were lucky that their city was wiped out before it devolved into increasingly inferior forms. Along similar lines, Sedley draws from the *Laws:*

> *Laws* III portrays the advance of civilization as bringing with it an inevitable decline into vice, with the result that its periodic renewal due to cataclysms is a welcome restitution of the simple virtues (Plat., *Leg.* 678a–679e).

He concludes:

[31]Bury translation.

[32]We are indebted to Thomas Johansen, *Plato's Natural Philosophy: A Study of the* Timaeus-Critias (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 148 for this point.

[33]Sedley, p. 119.

[34]Broadie, "Theodicy and Pseudo-History," p. 6.

> In all probability then, the world's proneness to periodic cataclysms was seen as no design fault at all, but as yet another index of providential planning.[35]

Sedley admits that the *Timaeus* offers no such rationale for cataclysms and attributes this "missing later part" to Plato's "failure ever to finish the *Timaeus-Critias*."[36] But let us set aside methodological objections and make a simple point. While the non-literalist explanation of natural disasters accounts for cataclysmic events that wipe out entire civilizations, it fails to account for minor natural disasters that do not.[37] A fire could, for example, burn down a house. Clearly, a house fire is one consequence of the "leeway that permits these elements periodically to run riot." Yet, *pace* Sedley, how could allowing for such leeway *not* be seen as a "failing [or] oversight [. . .] on the part of cosmic intelligence"? [38] The destruction of a house contributes nothing to the beneficial "cyclicity" of civilizations, so how can such a calamity be regarded as contributing to the greater good? Once again, the non-literalists are stuck attributing to the demiurge responsibility for an evil that clearly is *not* "an integral constituent of overall good."[39]

If all the non-literalist attempts at theodicy fail, as they seem to do, these failures threaten their reading of the demiurge as all-powerful cause of everything that has come to be.

## 2. TOWARD A LITERAL INTERPRETATION

Beyond critiques of the non-literalist reading, reasons for the literal reading involve its compatibility with Plato's moral philosophy, primarily with respect to how we view the *Timaeus*' divinities as moral exemplars. This moral component is not feasible under a non-literal reading.

In developing this argument we first frame the relevance of the *Timaeus* as a myth worthy of man's attention. By interpreting the *Timaeus*' divinities as benevolent craftsmen, man, too, should view himself as a craftsman who must persuade Necessity as effectively as possible. We begin with an analysis of the multifariousness of evil in the *Timaeus*. After enumerating three types of evil, we evaluate the moral responsibility and corresponding blame that are attributable to the *Timaeus*'s cosmic players. We conclude by emphasizing that the *Timaeus*'s mythic function is to provide an example of how men should act in response to the constraints of their circumstances. This moral component is not tenable under the non-literal reading, and thus such a reading is inferior to that of the literal counterpart.

[35]Sedley, p. 120.
[36]Ibid.
[37]Viktor Ilievski, "Plato's Theodicy in the *Timaeus*," *Rhizomata* 4 (2016): 218.
[38]Sedley, p. 119.
[39]Ibid., pp. 123–24.

### *2.1 The Purpose of Myth and Teleology*

Timaeus describes his cosmological story as a "likely myth" (*εἰκός μῦθος*, Plat., *Tim.* 29d1). In the *Republic*, Socrates warns that children will emulate the bad behavior of the gods they learn about in popular myths, so we should present children only with stories in which the gods behave justly. He remarks that we must also be wary of telling stories wherein justice in men does not correctly correlate to goodness and happiness (Plat., *Rep.* 392b1–5). It is thus reasonable to suppose that Timaeus' speech is couched in mythical terms because it is meant to inspire its listeners to emulate the behaviors of the gods it features.

As teleological agents, gods and people alike act for reasons, bringing an outcome about because they believe some particular state of affairs is best. The degree to which the outcome is actually best is directly proportional to the agent's intelligence: the more intelligent the agent, the closer his *conception* of what is best is to what is *actually* best.[40] The demiurge brings about order in the pre-cosmos because he believes that an ordered state of affairs is the best state of affairs (Plat., *Tim.* 30a6–8). Because the demiurge is supremely intelligent, his judgment of what is best is infallible (Plat., *Tim.* 30a9–b1).

It is the gods' activity of cosmic organization that is of chief significance for man to mimic. To be sure, it is not enough that man simply mimics these divinities' acts of organization based on man's arbitrary guess of what such organization should look like. The act of organization must be one that he performs with a strong apprehension of the cosmic model, since such is the case with the divinities' own organization (Plat., *Tim.* 29a). Indeed, it is because the demiurge is good that he looks to an eternal model to guide his craftsmanship. Since he *perfectly* apprehends the cosmic model his resulting creation, i.e., the cosmos, is as beautiful and good as possible (Plat., *Tim.* 28a6–b1). Unlike the demiurge, man's apprehension of the Forms is inherently imperfect; thus, his subsequent actions fall short of what is in fact best.

If the demiurge did not look to the cosmic model for guidance, then we could not affirm his goodness. Extrapolating this to the case of human agents, it is no great feat to infer the evil of man given his fallibility. However, this definition of evil ignores the questions of responsibility intuitively built into judgements of good and evil. In the following section we illustrate the difficulty of subsuming all evils under a single label and instead offer a threefold view of evil.

### *2.2 Negative Evil*

The first category of evil is one originally developed by Cherniss. This is the category of "negative evil," the result of the "derogation of reality" characteristic of the phenomenal world.[41] Because the realm of the Forms is perfect, and because

[40]Jelinek, p. 291.

[41]Harold Cherniss, "The Sources of Evil According to Plato," in *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays, vol. 2 Ethics, Politics, and Philosophy of Art and Religion*, ed. Gregory Vlastos (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), p. 246.

all reflections of Forms cannot be the same as the Forms that they strive to approximate, the reflections that exist in the phenomenal world are necessarily imperfect, constantly changing, and ultimately evil. It is clear that man, in virtue of his changing and imperfect nature, will always be negatively evil. To be sure, negative evil communicates something more akin to an ontological category that provides a proleptic explanation for the mere possibility of evil, rather than a variety of evil deed that is intuitively worthy of chastisement. Disorder is only possible because our phenomenal world is negatively evil, i.e., inevitably disordered in one way or another. Cherniss himself juxtaposes this with positive evil, however for the purposes of this paper we will opt for what we believe is a more nuanced account of the remaining varieties of evil.

### *2.3 The Consequences of Our Mixed Nature*

In an attempt to illustrate the breadth of Plato's further conception of evil as disorder, consider the following connection between the myth of Atlantis and the *Timaeus*' own theory of disease. Building upon work by Johansen,[42] the similarity in terminology used in both accounts supports the claim that Plato views excess (πλεονεξία), a type of disorder, as a cause of bad things both in natural terms, i.e., "natural evil," and in human applications, i.e., "moral evil." In the style of the non-literalists, one can explain both the downfall of Atlantis and the advent of bodily diseases as phenomena apparent as evil to man, but to the demiurge as parts of an overall good cosmic design. This explanation is unsatisfactory for reasons already stated. In its stead, we argue that the literal interpretation accounts for a moral component explaining these phenomena with respect to their uniquities as evils.

Timaeus states that diseases and conflicts originate ultimately from the unnatural movements and associated excesses or deficiencies (πλεονεξία καὶ ἔνδεια) of the primary cosmic elements residing within the body (Plat., *Tim*. 82a1–b1). Johansen identifies a political character of this description as evidenced by both the conflicts (στάσεις) in this initial passage and the later characterization of disease as foes fighting wars (πόλεμοι) of the body (Plat., *Tim.* 88e7). In a literal sense, Plato has provided a direct causal line between πλεονεξία and both disease and civil strife.[43] However, the πλεονεξία at play in the *Timaeus*' theory of disease is that among cosmic elements. That is, disease is caused by the disproportionality of the cosmic elements within the body that, in turn, cause erratic motion. By contrast, the πλεονεξία that lies at the root of civil disorder is unclear. One may be able to argue for some ultimate basis of bodily πλεονεξία as the primary cause of civil disorder, however such is not the method of explanation we intend to take.

Before we proceed to our preferred explanation, let us make one more note regarding Plato's cosmology and its relevance to the passage on disease etiology. Unlike the demiurge, Necessity lacks a soul, and thus is incapable of having desires, intentions, and beliefs. It does not bring about states of affairs with any goal

[42]Johansen, p. 20.
[43]Ibid.

in mind. Necessity is an ateleological cause whereas the demiurge is a teleological cause. But Necessity's ateleological status does not prevent it from qualifying as a *cause*. The fact that Intellect can persuade Necessity "most" (πλεῖστα) but not all of the time suggests that Necessity is a causal force in its own right, bringing about effects independently of the demiurge. Ultimately, the operations of these two causes, Necessity and the demiurge, explain the "brought-together" (σύστασις, Plat., *Tim.* 48a1) character of the cosmos' origin—a mixed nature, so to say.

The configuration of the human body itself is a product of this mixed nature of the cosmos' origin, as evidenced by the difficulty in creating the human body. Ideally the human body would be incapable of contracting disease since it results in death, an intuitively bad thing.[44] However, because the demiurge and younger gods are limited by Necessity, they must settle for making the best of what is possible. The human body is generally healthy and only falls into illness on occasion. That such a stability of health is even possible is proof of such an intelligent craftsmanship. It is, in fact, the limitations imposed by Necessity and the operation of the force of movement of "like toward like" and "unlike away from unlike" that contribute to πλεονεξία in the body, manifesting in disease (Plat., *Tim.* 53a2–5). Because disease is not the goal for the lesser gods in creating the human body, but an inevitable effect of the limits imposed by Necessity, we may consider disease ateleological. Let us emphasize that this is not the same position as the non-literalists, who argue that local evils are constituent of an overall good cosmos. That claim holds that diseases are teleological in that they fulfill roles present in the cosmic model and are intended by the demiurge in his organization of the universe. We maintain that because of the demiurge's inability to fully persuade Necessity to conform to his ideal arrangement, he must settle for allowing diseases to occur on occasion.

### *2.4 Natural and Moral Evil*

This account of πλεονεξία in the body, in virtue of it being caused by Necessity, is itself ateleological. Call this Necessity-driven πλεονεξία "natural evil." Rather than explain away apparent evils, such as disease, natural disasters, and similar non-human phenomena as "good" in the greater scheme of the cosmos, we can ascribe the full value of "evil" to them given that they arise from πλεονεξία. But what of political conflict, a πλεονεξία that seemingly must have some human component to it?

The episode of Atlantis provides a complex solution to this question. Johansen emphasizes, on the one hand, the topographies of Atlantis and Athens. Atlantis, an island nation, represents water; land-based Athens represents earth.[45] Because these two different elements are meeting we see the previous cosmic πλεονεξία manifest itself metaphorically in political conflict. This metaphorical approach appears plausible, however we need not cheapen this argument of causation by relying on metaphorical interpretations. Fortunately, Johansen also identifies two

[44]The desirability of long life is also substantiated in the related discussion of the crafting of the human head at 75c1, see below.

[45]Johansen, p. 21.

more explanations for Atlantis' downfall. The first chronologically is that Atlantis itself was founded in an act of desire (ἐπιθυμία) by Poseidon.[46] While conceptually similar to the term, this is not the straightforward πλεονεξία itself with which we have previously engaged. Let us then turn to the most convincing argument for the downfall of Athens: the πλεονεξία of man.

Returning to the act of encroachment of the Athenians by the Atlantids, consider a shift in perspective from the aforementioned metaphorical elemental-πλεονεξία to the human desire-πλεονεξία. Critias says that the Atlantids were filled with "unjust ambition and power" (πλεονεξίας ἀδίκου καὶ δυνάμεως, Plat., *Crit.* 121b6). This is the final characterization of the Atlantids before Critias shifts to an introduction of Zeus and his punishment of them. This πλεονεξία—the desire for material goods and military conquest beyond what is appropriate or just—causes the Atlantids' downfall. This too is an evil, however herein lies a degree of moral agency absent in what we earlier termed "natural evil." The Atlantids are certainly prone to commit evil actions. But the choice of whether to pursue a good or evil action is ultimately at the discretion of the individual. By contrast, let us term this human desire-πλεονεξία "moral evil."

By remaining sensitive to these two distinct forms of evil we are able to understand both the scope of πλεονεξία's application and more nuanced individual manifestations of the concept. Πλεονεξία, indeed all disorder, explains why bad things arise. However, we need not remedy all bad things by the same mechanisms save that these mechanisms are all based in proper proportionality and orderliness. Conceiving of evil in this way lets us take the intuitively evil things both natural and moral at face value without positing their arrangement in an overall righteous order.

### *2.5 Moral Responsibility*

Plato needs to account for moral responsibility in addition to the etiology of evil, and he does so with the image of Necessity's limitation of the demiurge. Moral responsibility in the form of blame is only attributable to an entity for whom the consequences of such responsibility matter. Such consequences include shame, remorse, and a renewed conviction to change one's behavior from the past when confronted with similar circumstances. This ability to recognize moral failure (moral evil) is, as Cherniss points out, a quality only attributable to souls that themselves inherently possess intelligence.[47] The intractability of Necessity and lack of a soul precludes it from such moral responsibility. Differently, while the presence of intelligence in the demiurge commits him to a degree of responsibility, he is unique in that he is only able to do good (i.e., the most orderly) things. While he is limited by Necessity, his apprehension of the cosmic model is unimpaired and his optimal organization of the universe is consistent with itself. We can assign both causal primacy and moral responsibility to the demiurge; however, regarding this latter

[46]Ibid.
[47]Cherniss, 250.

notion we may qualify that, on account of his infallible goodness, the demiurge will never be the object of moral blame.

Man, by contrast, is not only limited by Necessity itself, but additionally wavers in his apprehension of what the best course of action might be. These circumstances together allow us to entertain the possibility of man's moral responsibility. Man is not entirely responsible for his evil; he does not even hold the majority of the blame. Timaeus reserves this greater portion for man's upbringing (Plat., *Tim.* 87b3–4). But what is significant is that he does not absolve the individual of blame entirely—the man's teachers are more (μᾶλλον) blameworthy—and Timaeus even prescribes that man should undergo "pursuits and learning" (διὰ ἐπιτηδευμάτων μαθημάτων, Plat., *Tim.* 87b5) to better his evil condition. Thus, even if Timaeus does not give man a large role in his becoming evil, Timaeus certainly believes that man can play a significant role in transforming himself from evil to good. Timaeus may not blame the individual for being evil, but he *can* blame the individual for not bettering himself.

### *2.6 Human Imitation of the Divine*

Recall that the literal reading holds that the demiurge is limited in his crafting of the cosmos, and that the force inhibiting him from his desired perfect goodness is Necessity. Despite this limitation, the demiurge is the author of only good things. Taking the demiurge and his circumstances as a model, man can identify himself with the demiurge, he too wanting to do good but aware of his limitations. Carone makes a similar argument:

> Even when [. . .] the cosmic soul is entirely rational and has no irrational faculties, the goal in the individual, by imitation of the latter, is to use his subrational faculties in such a way that he too is free from false judgement and irrationality in the undesirable sense of the word, as conflicting with reason.[48]

While the earlier mention of "pursuits and learning" (Plat., *Tim.* 87b5) serves as a remedy for one's evil course of life, it provides only a nominal insight into the better-making process for humans. As Carone points out, a more specific communication of how one might make oneself better involves correcting subrational faculties, such as the desire for food, which results not only in "fulfilling a physiological need (Plat., *Tim.* 70d7–8), but also [. . .] cultivating the appropriate balance between body and soul without which virtue is impossible (Plat., *Tim.* 87c–d)."[49] Just as the demiurge acts only with good ends in mind, i.e., teleologically, so too should man pursue his own good ends (physical sustenance and body-soul harmony) and avoid evil via disproportionality of gluttony or starvation.[50]

Man's righteous directing of his subrational faculties occurs throughout the text. At 91d Timaeus tells us that "simpleminded men" use their eyes to gaze at the

[48]Gabriella Roxana Carone, *Plato's Cosmology and its Ethical Dimensions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 61.

[49]Ibid.

[50]This latter remark on disproportionality refers to the πλεονεξία καὶ ἔνδεια referenced at *Tim*. 82a2.

heavens for purposes of indulging in pleasure, so are doomed to degenerate into birds. The gods invented eyesight and gave it to humans "so that we might observe the orbits of intelligence in the heavens and apply them to the revolutions of our own understanding" to the effect that "we should stabilize the straying revolutions within ourselves by imitating the completely unstraying revolutions of the god" (Plat., *Tim.* 47b4–c3). They gave us hearing so that we may listen to music, which should "serve as an ally in the fight to bring order to any orbit in our souls that has become unharmonized and make it concordant with itself" (Plat., *Tim.* 47d4–6).

Yet one must still recognize that this good-directedness is ultimately still constrained. Recall the younger gods' crafting of the skull (Plat., *Tim.* 75b6–c6).[51] Timaeus remarks that if the characteristics of flesh, sinew, and bone were willing to work together, then human lives would be longer and of better quality. The fact that the younger gods are unable to negotiate these substances and their characteristics, or devise a new substance with the desired combination of characteristics specifically for the head, demonstrates a lack of power. These younger gods illustrate that while we can persuade Necessity to generally successful ends, a degree of failure is nearly inevitable in any attempt at persuasion.

Carone has also pointed out the association of Necessity with chance or luck (τύχη).[52] [53] When we are successful in persuading Necessity to desired ends, such as in the aforementioned use of a subrational desire for food, we consider ourselves fortunate, i.e., experiencing good luck. By contrast, when we are unsuccessful at such persuasion, as the younger gods were in creating a head that is both rigid and of unimpaired intelligence, we have experienced bad luck. Nonetheless we are not entirely powerless at persuading Necessity, but work to make the best of our circumstances. This understanding of τύχη has the advantage of allowing man some role in the betterment of his situation (via the persuasion of Necessity) and absolving himself to some extent of responsibility regarding his life's woes. This reiterates the theme Timaeus communicates at 87b regarding moral responsibility. In fact, when we view this approach to moral responsibility in light of the role of the demiurge and younger gods as model agents of persuasion, we can also view them as *moral* models.

The mere act of persuasion by humans is inherently teleological, but this does not automatically assume that the end (*τέλος*) is morally good.[54] Humans cannot be blamed for their limited persuasion of the recalcitrant Necessity, and their ontological inferiority (negative evil) even admits some degree of misapprehension of the cosmic model. The myth of the *Timaeus* and its similarly limited demiurge and younger divinities provides precisely the mythic model discussed at *Rep*. 392b–c.

[51]To be sure, the whole body, and not just the skull, demonstrates a series of negotiations between exclusive characteristics. See 74b on sinews as allowing flexibility of the limbs in contrast to the rigidity of bones, as well as on flesh functioning as padding for the bones; 74d on sinews as an intermediate negotiation of the respective rigidity and elasticity of bones and flesh; 75a on the duplicity of the flesh as both a simple padding substance for unintelligent bones and a vehicle for sensation (in the tongue).

[52]Carone, 62–68.

[53]See especially *Tim*. 46e; similarly, *Crit*. 120e.

[54]Jelinek, 291.

Plato requires a mythic model that demonstrates divine benevolence (Plat., *Rep.* 391e1) and a positive correlation between justice (δικαιοσύνη) and what is good (αγαθόν). If it is not clear already that the implicit message of the *Timaeus* as a whole communicates this sentiment, those still skeptical of this assertion need only look to 42b wherein Timaeus states, "If they shall master these [emotions and violent affections] they will live justly (δίκῃ), but if they are mastered, unjustly (ἀδικίᾳ)." These emotions and affections are the products of Necessity that arise during the implanting of souls in bodies, and thus their proper mastering is by definition a successful persuasion of Necessity toward good ends.

The demiurge, and more importantly his limited ability in persuading Necessity, is central to humans' attainment of this goal. A deity with *carte blanche* in designing the universe serves no mythic purpose as a moral model for man. Thus, the non-literal interpretation cannot obtain any moral significance for its omnipotent demiurge. By contrast, the literal interpretation does obtain such moral significance that is consonant with Plato's larger views on moral responsibility. One is only responsible for that which is in his control, and so we do not blame the demiurge for natural evils, as they are necessary effects of his inhibited arrangement of the cosmos. Nor do we blame the lesser gods for their inability to craft a human head that possesses similarly high levels of rigidity and intellectual sensitivity, for they, too, are limited by what the cosmic material physically permits. Humans, by contrast, are blameworthy in that they certainly can err in their apprehension of the inherently good cosmic model. When one takes Plato's views on moral responsibility alongside the literal reading of the demiurge's limited persuasion of Necessity, we see exactly the type of myth that Plato intended for his ideal society.[55]

[55]Many thanks to Dan Linford for his input on previous drafts of Part One of this paper.