MORAL VIRTUE AND ASSIMILATION TO GOD IN PLATO'S TIMAEUS

Timothy A. Mahoney

Ofloioiais dtu) Kara TO Swarov, 'becoming like god so far as possible' came in antiquity to be universally acknowledged as the Platonic goal in life. In modern studies, oixoicais dew is rarely even to be found in the index. So begins David Sedley's 'The Ideal of Godlikeness', an article that is a significant step towards remedying the modern neglect of this important Platonic theme. None the less, I shall dispute one of Sedley's central claims: the Timaeus suggests that Plato's oixoicais dew ideal 'leaves moral virtue behind and focuses instead on purely intellectual development' (CB, 335 ~ Fine, 324). I hope both to demonstrate that Sedley's arguments are flawed and to show how and why this ideal in the Timaeus includes moral virtue as an essential component.

At Tim. 90A—D the character Timaeus urges us to cultivate the most divine part of us, and thereby attain happiness:

If someone has committed himself entirely to learning and true wisdom, and it is these among the things at his disposal that he has most practised, then he cannot be happy unless he who has committed himself to learning and true wisdom is also happy. And this is the case if that part of himself which is committed to learning and true wisdom is happy. For if the part of oneself which is committed to learning and true wisdom is not happy, it cannot be the case that the whole part is happy. And if the whole part is happy, it is the case that the part is happy.

Earlier versions of this paper were given at two conferences: the Rhode Island Philosophical Society meeting of 15 November 2003, at which Donald Zeyl provided a response, and the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division meeting in December 2003. An earlier version of this paper was given at the conference 'Becoming like God' in the index.' This article first appeared as 'Becoming like God' in the Timaeus and Aris­ totle', in T. Calvo and L. Brisson (eds.), Interpreting /Ac Timaeus-Critias; Pro­ ceedings of the IV Symposium Platonicum (Sankt Augustin, 1997), 327-39; an expanded version appeared as 'The Ideal of Godlikeness', in G. Fine (ed.), Oxford Readings in Philosophy: Plato (2 vols.; Oxford, 1999), 309-28. References to 'CB' and 'Fine' are to these two versions.
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In Plato's Timaeus, the so-called virtues of the soul look likely to be close to those of the body—for actually when we do not at first have them we seem to get a grasp on truth. And so far as possible for human nature to have a mind that lives with daimon, it seems, to belong, it seems, to something more divine. (CB, 334b-c)

Let me make two initial points concerning this argument. First, Sedley supports Plotinus' comparison with the Timaeus, and the position found at 518d-9 (Protag. 1). Sedley notes this (CB, 331a-b; Fine, 333-4; Sedley kindly pointed out that Christopher Bobonich makes a similar suggestion). Indeed, at the end of book 7 (520e), Socrates claims that the philosophers who have seen the Form of the Good to 'descend back into the cave' and to rule there will be giving just orders to the moral virtues. In the next two sections, the latter part of Sedley's article is devoted to arguing that the contemplative life offered by the gods to mankind for present and future times. (CB, Fine, Tim. 332c-d; cf. 47b and 90d-1.)

But does the Republic present an unfavourable contrast between moral and intellectual virtues? The latter part of Sedley's article is devoted to arguing that the contemplative life offered by the gods to mankind for present and future times. (CB, Fine, Tim. 332c-d; cf. 47b and 90d-1.)

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that true philosophers 'regard justice as the most important and essential thing' (Timaeus 80 D 1-2).

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that genuine wisdom does not leave moral virtues behind, as Sedley proposes two further arguments to support his interpretation. The first is contained in the following passage:

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The other translation, I propose, corrects the reversal in our understanding of the phrase 'in the time of birth' (Trepi yevofiv) that this argument carries much of the burden in establishing the soul. The other translation: 'We should redirect the revolutions in our heads that were thrown off course at the time of birth' (Timaeus 28 A, 29 A).

Sedley's second argument is this. One corrects one's thinking by 'learning the harmonies and revolutions of the whole world' (42 E-44 A). The widely accepted alternative translation is represented by Zeyl's rendering, leaving practical reasoning behind: 'As in the study of astronomy is valued for its ability to turn the character Timaeus articulates at the beginning of his discourse (43 D-E). These earlier passages make it clear that the corruption of the revolutions in us has been discussed. At 43 A-44 A, Sedley suggests the reference back to the previous discussion of the corrupted revolutions in the heaven described in 43 A; I cannot see what would motivate this in the present context' (CB, 328).

The passage at 40 D-41 E is not the first time the damage to the world soul, the rational soul-part, housed in the head, is discussed in the Timaeus. In an extended discussion at 44 D-45 A, Plato presents a description of the work done by the lesser gods in fashioning the world soul. The disorderly motions set up in the body by the earlier revolutions 'mutilated and disfigured the circles in every possible way so that the circles barely held together and though they remained in motion, they moved without rhyme or reason' (43 D-E). These motions 'in motion, they moved without rhyme or reason' (43 D-E) are the backdrop against which the corruption of the revolutions at the time of birth is set in the body.

The cure for this is accepting the three fundamental principles that Plato presents in 34 B-35 A. These principles are to:

1. The fundamental distinction between being and becoming
2. The principle of causality: everything that is generated has a cause
3. The correlation of being and time: 'time is attendant upon becoming incarnated. Sedley recognizes this, and agrees with Zeyl's rendering: 'The immortals [the Form of the Good] are the rulers of the world of becoming and are the cause of the cycles of time' (44 B).

Moreover, there is an answer to Sedley's question as to what motivates the use of a chronological reference—'around the time of . . .' and I cannot see what would motivate this in the present context' (CB, 328). On the one hand, Sedley argues against a rendering such as Zeyl's: 'the only point of a chronological reference is instrumentally valuable as a step towards the realm of being and knowledge of all other things is of no benefit to us' (89 D 2).

But if we reject Sedley's interpretation, how then should we understand the passage correctly? I propose the following. The passage at 40 D-41 E is not the first time the damage to the world soul, the rational soul-part, housed in the head, is discussed in the Timaeus. In an extended discussion at 44 D-45 A, Plato presents a description of the work done by the lesser gods in fashioning the world soul. The disorderly motions set up in the body by the earlier revolutions 'mutilated and disfigured the circles in every possible way so that the circles barely held together and though they remained in motion, they moved without rhyme or reason' (43 D-E). These motions 'in motion, they moved without rhyme or reason' (43 D-E) are the backdrop against which the corruption of the revolutions at the time of birth is set in the body.

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...to describe the time at which these disruptions begin is with a suitably approximate expression such as *nepi r-qv yevfoiv,* 'around the timing of this corruption seems to be captured by the phrase *μετά τινα τον που ἔρχεται.*' If this translation is accurate, then we must reject Sedley's most powerful argument. In fact, contra Sedley, we have good reason to believe that moral emotions are caught up by a surge of air-driven winds. The motions produced by all these encounters would then be conducted through the body to the soul and strike against it just as it was beginning to go its own way. And they further shook the orbit of the Different right through *την τελικήν περιφέρειαν τῆς τούτων υπολογίζεται.*

Now let us turn to Sedley's question: what motivates the use of head injuries? As he is about to fashion human souls, the Demiurge exhorts the lesser deities to whom he hands over the task of fashioning human souls. They completely bound that of the Same by flowing against it in the opposite direction, and held it fast just as it was beginning to go its own way. And if a person lived a good life throughout the due course of his time, he would at the end return to his dwelling place in his companion star, to live a life of happiness that agreed with this character. And if they could master these emotions, their lives would be just.*

Disturbances would occur when the body encountered and collided with a hard lump of earth or with the flow of gliding waters, or when it was caught up by a surge of air-driven winds. The motions produced by all these encounters would then be conducted through the body to the soul and strike against it just as it was beginning to go its own way.
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But if he failed this, he would be born a second time, now as a woman. And if even then he still could not refrain from wickedness, he would change once again, this time into some wild animal that resembled the wicked nous. Justice as an essential aspect of character he had acquired.

Let me turn now to my own interpretation of assimilation to the divine. In sum, a just life is a good life that leads to happiness; an unjust life leads not simply to unhappiness, but even to a less than human existence.

The above considerations show that the correction of our revolutions at the end of our lives is the achievement of the aims of Nous, so the core of human happiness is the proper functioning of Nous, which is the achievement of the aims of Nous, as far as he or she is able, and this very fact entails that he or she be just. In short, to aspire to likeness to god is to pursue human justice as the pre-eminent other-regarding virtue for the Greeks, so that the promotion of justice and the promotion of the aim of assimilation are mutually entailing.

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Two other items corroborate this. First, as we saw above at 42 B quoted above. In that passage the rewards of the deities at 42 B are mentioned; no mention is made of happiness in this life. But the later discussion of the correction of our revolutions at 90 6-91 A1 concludes; what is clear is that the most excellent life is offered to humans now and when the Demiurge has failed to live a good life, 'would be reborn a second time, now as a woman' (90 E 6-91 A1). What is clear is that the most excellent life is offered to humans now and when the Demiurge has failed to live a good life, 'would be reborn a second time, now as a woman'.

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The dualism of forms is also clear: it is the purpose ascribed to the Demiurge in his creation of the world of forms. The Demiurge is presented as the personification of Nous (mind) persuading and overcoming Necessity (Destiny Kratos), and the god's model is described as what was good, and the one who is good can never become jealous of anything.

Socrates had hypothesized about how things would be if he ruled the world (Phaedo, 69c); here in the Timaeus he contemplates' Nous . . . . The god wanted everything to become as much like himself as possible . . . The god wanted everything to be good and nothing definitively that was bad so far as that was possible. (29 E-30 A)

Nous are. The same specification that it is that governs the universe (Timaeus, 30 B) is also found at Philebus, 13, 966 E, 'which is responsible for the order in the universe', and, perhaps, is specified as the cause of the mixture of the limited and the unlimited, which is 'for the best.' In these passages Plato is ever the ruler over the universe'

As the Stranger emphasizes that the ruler of the universe arranges even the minutest details so that the whole universe will be as good as possible, we too, surely, must do likewise: we must describe their success based on what is possible for them to achieve.

The world is specifically fashioned by the Demiurge, as is also clear in the passage quoted above concerning the correction of the revolving stars, 'for it is the governing principle of the world, concerned with the good and the best.' This same goal is attributed to the ruling god of the universe in Philebus, 30 B, where Nous was good and nothing was evil.

In each of these dialogues, the god is fashioning things such that one strives for those which, when deserted by intelligence, produce only haphazard and disorderly effects every time. (46 D 7 E 6)

In a well-functioning organism the good of the parts and the good of the whole are brought in harmony. We too, surely, must do likewise: we must describe things that possess understanding and reasonableness, with those things ever directed by a correct cause, as Plato is very careful to emphasize.

The point is expressed in the Timaeus' (98 A-B) that results in the world soul and human souls. The purpose of the Demiurge in the world and human souls is the fashion of things 'in the likeness of the Demiurge is the cause of the mixing of the limited and the unlimited, as the Philosopher (Cf. 33 E 3-7) avers, the philosophers (of the world) . . . in the world.] Their business is to take care of the world's business as best as possible.

This is an echo of what Socrates says in the Phaedo,
subject TO Karavoovv resemble the object of its thought (Karav, ovf^Uvipy (90 I)) Sedley's translation as above)," and this part continually referred to as the divine part in this section (e.g. Beiov, 90 A 8). It is this aspect of the human being that is made by the Demiurge himself, using the leftover ingredients in the mixing bowl he used to fashion the world soul (41 D), before he turns over to lesser gods the task of fashioning the rest of the Jiuman being. Thus our divine part, that part for which one is caring when one corrects the revolutions in one's head, is like the world soul and the Demiurge himself in that our divine part is also Nous.

It would seem to follow that the most important aspect of the human being, Nous, would share the functions and the aims which are attributed to the Demiurge and the world soul. Furthermore, since Nous is our divine and best part, by achieving these aims humans also attain the very core of human happiness. If this is so, then being just is an essential part of human happiness. Being just implies doing what one can do for the good of others, thereby fulfilling one of the fundamental aims of Nous.

Indeed, the way in which Socrates typifies justice is represented by the examples in book 4 of a well-functioning psyche and a well-functioning state in which each part contributes to the good of others and to the good of the whole. I suggest that this is why the Locus classicus of Plato's doctrine of assimilation to god in the Theaetetus has Socrates emphasize that because god is supremely just, justice is the most salient feature of our likeness to god (176 B)." Justice aims at the harmonious good of all, which is also the aim of Nous. Like god, the good human strives to fulfill the aims of Nous in part by aiming at justice, and to the extent that he or she attains this aim, he or she also attains happiness.

Zeyl translates the passage 'bring into conformity with its objects our faculty of understanding'.

"For an analysis of the relevant passages see T. A. Mahoney, 'Is Platonic Assimilation to Cod in the Theaetetus Purely Otherworldly?', Amelie Philosophy (forthcoming).

"In fact, one cannot properly aim at justice unless one has also attained the other aim of Nous, wisdom: without wisdom, one's practical reasoning is impaired, as discussed above in connection with Rep. 505 A.