



REFLECTIONS ON
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Poetic Myths of the Afterlife: Plato's Last Song

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1. Introduction

At the opening of Plato's *Republic* (330d-e), the successful retired businessman, Cephalus, notes that when someone thinks his end is near, he becomes concerned about the afterlife. The myths once heard about how the unjust will pay for their crimes in Hades (*hoi legomenoi muthoi peri tōn en Haidou*, 330d7-8), he contends, now disturb the soul (*strephousin hautou tēn psuchēn*) for fear they may be true (*alētheis*, 330d9-e1). What happens to human souls in Hades is, in fact, one of the five subjects of mythical discourse according to Plato (*R.* 392a3-9; see also 427b).¹

In this paper, I focus on the notion of *psuchē* or soul and the myths of the afterlife from Homer to Plato. This theme is not only of central importance in the context of Plato's poetics but also in the context of the evolution of Plato's philosophy and, indeed, in the history of Greek philosophy and religion in general. We tend to ignore that most of Plato's own myths fall into this category. It is thus surprising that this theme isn't often analyzed, for it has some surprising results.

Homer, of course, is the natural place to begin. In his critical overview of the *muthoi* of the inhabitants of Hades in the *Republic* (386a-387e), Plato draws all of his examples from Homer, and they all suggest that death and the afterlife are terrible things even for a decent man (*ho epieikēs anēr*, 378d5). The spell of Homer is, as we know, of paramount importance in Plato. Homer was indeed considered as the educator of the Greeks—and this is more than a simple cliché. In many respects, Plato sees Homer as his primary rival, but one from whom he will also profit considerably.

In conjunction, the early Greek poets—first and foremost Homer and Hesiod—were known as “singers” (*aidoi*) rather than “poets” or “makers” (*poiētai*).² As was common in ancient societies,³ their poetry

¹ The five entities (names, classes or events), which are the subject of mythical discourse are gods, daimons, heroes, inhabitants of Hades, and human beings of the past. Plato is critical of the way the traditional poets describe these entities in their poetic songs or *muthoi*. Plato discusses each of these in context: gods (377e-383c); daimons (382e6); the inhabitants of, or life in, Hades (386a-387e); heroes (388a-392a); human beings (392a-c).

² What the *aidoi* do is sing (*aidō*, e.g. Hom. *Il.* 1.1; *Od.* 1.147, 325-29, 338-40; Hes. *T.* 34) and what they sing is a song (*aidē*, e.g. *Il.* 2.599, *Od.* 1.329, 340; Hes. *Th.* 22, 104, *Op.* 659). It seems that this is the norm in all traditional societies.

³ This phenomenon still continues in the more traditional ones. Indeed, most texts considered sacred are still sung or chanted (e.g. the Bhagavah-Gita, the Qur'an, the Torah, the Mass).

was sung and their songs considered sacred.⁴ Indeed Homer and Hesiod both claimed to be “divinely inspired” (Hes. *Th.* 31; Hom. *Od.* 8.539, 22.347-48). Moreover, because of their privileged relation with the Muses, the daughters of Zeus and Memory (*Th.* 52-53, 915-18), who know all things, Homer and Hesiod claimed to have knowledge of all things past, present, and future (Hom. *Il.* 1.70, 2.484-492; *Od.* 12.191; Hes. *Th.* 38).⁵ With this in mind, it is likely that for the Greeks their first idea of *psuchē* and what happens to it after death was the Homeric one. And because of the natural role of *mimēsis* in poetic performance, this notion would become all the more engrained in the minds of the vast majority of Greeks.⁶ In conjunction, some of Homer’s poetic songs (and all of Hesiod’s) were meant to be sung as incantations, and hexameter verse, as López-Ruiz notes, is the natural medium for this.⁷ Hesiod insists that his songs or verses have healing qualities (*Th.* 98-103) although what Homer had to say about the afterlife assuredly had the opposite effect.

The history of soul and the afterlife is more intriguing and complex than simply being a series of footnotes to Homer. A number of other competing notions of the soul and the afterlife began to emerge shortly after the Homeric poems appeared. These too are steeped in myth and ritual and the song culture. They provide a very different picture of the soul and the afterlife. Such is the case with the various mysteries—Eleusinian, Dionysian, Orphic, and, if I may, Pythagorean. All of these put the accent on the salvation of the *individual* soul. And then we have the Milesians, or first philosophers. There is a dramatic shift here again. With this group, soul appears as a universal moving principle, which will later become in Plato a key to his whole enterprise.

⁴ In every context in which a song is used we have the rhythmic movement of dance, and sometimes of instrumental music, along with the song. I note this too because song and dance, which are often inseparable (see, for example, Hes. *Th.* 3-4, 9, 69-70), play a much more important role in Plato in the context of myth and poetry than generally assumed.

⁵ It seems clear that the memory that presides over poetic inspiration is both impersonal and collective, that is, it does not concern the past of the individual *aoidos* or singer-poet. Nor is this memory orientated toward remembering past reincarnations, which will be relevant to what follows. Homer is quite explicit that there is only a succession of human generations; the circle is between living and dead (see Hom. *Il.* 6.146ff).

⁶ The aim of the imitation (or *mimēsis*) employed by the poet or his interpreters is thus to rouse the public into identifying with the beings summoned before them. These beings that are the subjects of mythical discourse (see note 1) constitute social and ethical models which are offered to the audience; indeed, they are meant to transform the behavior of the audience. Thus the poet though poetry wants to mold the souls of his audience in the name of the community so they conform to the values proper to the community. In conjunction, the poetic performance of myths also provides explanations concerning the origin of the gods, the world, human beings, and the society in which they reside. And, in some instances, explanations and descriptions of the afterlife!

⁷ López-Ruiz (2010, 132ff; 186ff). These songs are, in fact, an amalgamation of the sacred, mystical and magical, which will also be common to the poetry associated with the Mysteries.

Plato enters the scene with a rich tradition behind him and from which he will profit considerably. Nonetheless, soul is a notion he never ceases to grapple with. For Plato, soul can only be *represented* by eschatological or cosmological myths. It is inaccessible to explanation. This is ironic when we consider that *psuchē* is the subject and common principle of his physics, his epistemology, and his psychology/anthropology. And even when soul becomes the cornerstone of the hypothesis of a distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, with soul understood as a reality intermediary between the two, this occurs in the context of a cosmological myth. It is still an *unverifiable* account.

My main focus in Plato will be on his notions of soul (individual and universal) and *post-mortem* retribution. Plato was the apostle of reincarnation, and it is interesting to see how this idea, borrowed from his predecessors, evolved over his dialogues. I want to show that Plato's final thoughts on the soul and the afterlife are a giant leap from his earlier positions. Indeed, they come across as a kind of new age eschatology. But I also do not want to lose sight of the role of Plato as a poet and the role of poetic performance throughout this odyssey. There is, as I see it, a kind of perplexing culmination in the *Laws*. Not only does Plato provide us with a *scientific* eschatology, but he sees himself as a legislator-poet who, on my interpretation, wants to transform the entire law code into the ultimate poetic performance—the greatest of all tragedies!

Let's now turn to Homer.

2. *Psuchē and the Afterlife in Homer*

In Homer *psuchē* signifies “life;” it is the life force or power by which we breathe. It is the “breath-soul” because *psuchein* means “to breathe, to blow.”⁸ It gives life to all bodies, and the body dies when the *psuchē* leaves it.⁹ The *psuchē* also persists after death, generally without consciousness, in the house of Hades, where it is identified with the *eidolon*, the visible but impalpable semblance of the once living person (see also *Od.* 11.220–24 and Onians 1951, 94). In this case, the *psuchē* is often characterized as the “ghost soul” as opposed to the “breath-soul” when it is living.

The part of the soul that is the seat of the “conscious self,” that is, of thinking and feeling, is called the *thumos*. It is located in the chest and sometimes is called the blood-soul.¹⁰ The *thumos* is inseparable from the body and on death ceases to exist.

In the Homeric view, then, when the body dies, its *psuchē* goes to the house of Hades. Hades (*aidēs*) literally means “that which is unseen.”¹¹ Ironically, there is plenty to *see* in Hades. This is due in large

⁸ Plato captures this sense well in his etymological analysis of *psuchē* in *Cra.* 399e–400a.

⁹ In Homer, the *psuchē* as the “breath-soul” is associated with the head (*Il.* 9.409, 16.856), which is considered sacred and is honoured above all (e.g. *Il.* 17.240ff, 18.82; *Od.* 22.463, 10.286ff.) This may be the case because the “life-breath” enters through the head, in particular the mouth.

¹⁰ The word *thumos* is apparently derived from *thuō* “seething with blood/anger.”

¹¹ Hades signifies both the god of the netherworld and the netherworld itself.

part to the poet's creative imagination. One of the primary functions of the poet is to bring to *life*, so to speak, the mythical beings of the distant past and world (or worlds) in which they reside. This is what arouses the pathos of the audience, which participates fully in the performance.

The condition of the dead in Hades is anything but enticing. Achilles sums up Hades rather well, when he says that he would rather work for a poor man than rule over all the *psuchai* or ghost-souls in Hades (*Od.* 11.498-99). Still, the dead retain, contrary to what is generally thought, some capacity to remember and have some feelings about the world they have left behind (see, for example, *Od.* 11.174-75). We see this in the famous scene where the spirits of the dead express their respective concerns after drinking blood from sacrificed sheep. Their blood-ghost or *thumos* is thus temporarily revived. This suggests, moreover, that the inhabitants of Hades are quasi-embodied rather than disembodied. Indeed, the dead appear to be *aware* of their fate and capable of *seeing* one another. Thus when Ajax *sees* Odysseus, he has no desire to communicate with him as he is still miffed about having been judged less worthy than Odysseus in the competition for Achilles' armor (*Od.* 11.542-60). Although Ajax had not drunk any sacrificial blood, he nonetheless still exhibits a form of consciousness. That the dead in Hades can still *see* seems to be a kind of intimidating truism, as we see in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (1371-73), where the king informs his subjects that he blinded himself so he would not have to look upon the faces of his mother and father in Hades.

Death in Homer is also eternal. One would expect that eternal life in Hades was punishment enough, but some characters are seen as suffering eternal punishment in Hades, in addition to just being there. Such were the cases of Tityos, Tantalus, and Sisyphus (*Od.* 11.576-600).¹² For them there is no chance of recompense, no sense of reform, and no forward-looking resort to some kind of reincarnation. In several of his eschatological myths, Plato will reserve a similar fate for tyrants.¹³

3. *Psuchē and the Afterlife in Mystery Religions*

The first instances in Greek literature of rewards and punishments in the afterlife are in the *Hymn to Demeter* (480-82), which dates to the seventh century B.C.E. Here the reference is to the Eleusinian mysteries (*hierā*), which were agricultural in origin. The Eleusinian Mysteries held out the promise that those who are initiated will be blessed (*albios*) in the next world, while the lot (*aisa*) of the uninitiated (*atelēs*) will be darkness and gloom. There is no mention here of rewards for good conduct: how the initiates lived their lives was of no

¹² But they did not receive this punishment in Hades. There are no judges there. They offended the dignity of the gods so the gods used surrogates, e.g. daimōns (see Saunders, 1991, 52ff). There is a sense in which their punishments were just vindictive.

¹³ But are there any privileged individuals who do not endure the same miserable lot as the others? The hero Menelaus seems to fall into this category, for we are told that it is fated that the immortals will convey him to the Elysian Plains where life is easiest (*Od.* 4.561-68). This suggests that there is a happy eternal afterlife for at least one, which is something to build on.

consequence. Moreover, immortality was based on a *single* divine revelation. Finally, there is also no mention of reincarnation or transmigration (*metempsychōsis*), which will become the hallmark of more *exclusive* mystery religions.¹⁴ Mysteries, of course, are always based on myths—that is, on *hieroi logoi* or sacred stories/songs.

Another mystery cult, which had the status of an Athenian civic religion, was the Dionysian or Bacchic Mysteries. These also had an agrarian origin; they were connected with grapes and wine, which Plato will skillfully use to his advantage in the *Laws*. Dionysian festivals were everywhere in the Greek world—the most important being the Dionysia. Poetic competitions were a mainstay at the Dionysian festivals. And similar poetic competitions will be one of his primary educational tools in the *Laws*. These festivals are invariably connected with song and dance.¹⁵

It is unclear when Dionysus became connected with mysteries, which imply individual initiation into a secret cult and a happy afterlife.¹⁶ But they have strong bonds with the Orphic mysteries, which also appear in the sixth century. They are connected, of course, with the legendary figure of Orpheus, an archetype of an inspired singer-poet with the ability to charm or enchant all living things, even stones!¹⁷

The parallels between the Bacchic and Orphic mysteries are so close (both Orpheus and Dionysus descended into Hades and returned) that often one talks as if they are the same thing.¹⁸ But there are a number of major differences. First, how the initiates lived their lives was of no consequence for the *mustai* of Dionysian mysteries, but for the Orphics immortality could *only* be achieved through laborious efforts that lasted throughout one's life. Also, while Orphism agrees with the Bacchic contention of the immortality and divinity of the soul, Orphics put the accent on purification (*katharsis*) from an original sin or primordial crime. In conjunction, the Orphics believed in a doctrine of reincarnation and metempsychosis, which was not part of any of the other mysteries. As Plato notes in the *Cratylus* (400c), the

¹⁴ For series of recent studies, see Cosmopoulos 2003. The Eleusinian Mysteries, which are both mystic and eschatological, represent a marked contrast with what we find in Homer.

¹⁵ In the *Phdr.* (244d-e, 265b), Plato considers telestic madness (*mania*), of whom Dionysus is the master, as divinely inspired. The god acts through mystic rites and purifications, he claims, and brings release from troubles due to an ancient crime. The mystic rites, for their part, also play a positive role in the *Lg.* (790d-791a) where they are connected with rhythmic movement of song and dance, which cures fears, a key component in the poetic fabrication of myth.

¹⁶ Burkert notes that “from the end of the sixth century Dionysus is [already] a god of the mysteries, of secret initiation rites which are directed toward the afterlife and promise bliss to the dead beyond the grave.” (2004, 72). This is confirmed in Heraclitus (DK22B15).

¹⁷ Pindar (c. 518-446) calls Orpheus the “father of songs” (*P.* 4.4.315).

¹⁸ Burkert has convincingly shown the degree to which the Orphic description of the afterlife—along with emphasis on ritual and magic formulas—derives from Egyptian funerary lore, and that the Bacchic Mysteries “which claim to guarantee otherworldly bliss” are influenced by the Egyptian Osiris cult (2004, 88).

Orphics say that the body (*sōma*) is the tomb (*sēma*) of the soul (*psuchē*) with the idea that the soul is being punished for something and will remain in this prison until the penalty is paid.¹⁹

Around the same time Orphism appears on the scene, we also have the advent of Pythagoras (c. 570-500). Pythagoras and his followers, like the Orphics, believed in the immortality of the soul, metempsychosis, vegetarianism, primitive taboos, ritual purification, and initiations to assure a better lot for the soul in the next life.²⁰ The notion of an “original sin,” which is something entirely foreign to Plato, is also connected with both groups.²¹

Pythagoreans differed from the Orphics in a number of ways. Most important of all, the Pythagorean community subjected its members to a complete formation integrating scientific knowledge (including astronomy, mathematics, and music) with a complex of ethical, metaphysical, and religious principles so as to assure salvation, that is, to become one with the divine.²²

The Pythagoreans had a profound impact on Plato. The two Platonic dialogues that are the most indebted to Pythagoras are the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus*, which deal with the immortality and destiny of the human soul, on the one hand, and the role of mathematics in unraveling the secrets of the universe, on the other. In both cases, we are nonetheless dealing with what Plato calls myth. I will return to this later. Meanwhile, from Pythagoras’ contemporary, Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 575-475), we can conclude that Pythagoras’ *psuchē* did see and learn everything from previous incarnations (DK21B7).²³ This is what Plato will call the doctrine of recollection, and it will play a major role in his arguments for the immortality of the soul and in his eschatological myths.²⁴

¹⁹ The Orphics, as Plato notes in the *Lg.* (6.782c), were vegetarians who avoided eating the flesh of animals. They believed, in fact, that soul of a man could be reborn in the body of another man and that the soul of an animal could be reborn in the body of another animal or man. This was based on the kinship of nature, which is also found in Pythagoreans.

²⁰ It is worth noting that origin of the doctrine of reincarnation and metempsychosis was quite foreign to the Greeks. Nor was it part of Egyptian religious ideas. They had long believed in immortality and even “judgment” in the afterlife, but not in reincarnation. In fact, the only country/culture at the time in which it had been an integral part of their religious beliefs was India (see Kahn 2001, 19). But the Indian notion of karma and rebirth is not based on the idea of an *original sin*, as we find in the Orphic and Pythagorean doctrine.

²¹ Empedocles (c.490-430) is, I believe, the posterchild for the Pythagoreans in this regard.

²² Walter Burkert in his influential book on Pythagoras (*Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*), claims he was just a religious teacher and mystagogue and was not part of the influential Ionian physicists. Heraclitus describes Pythagoras as a charlatan (22B129), but claimed he practiced *historiē* or investigation more than any other.

²³ Whether Pythagoras, like Plato, believed in rewards and punishments for the transmigrating soul is unclear. There are no explicit references in Orphism or Pythagoreanism to *post-mortem* punishments, although Empedocles certainly implies that the best souls become outstanding men and even gods (B127, 146, 147).

²⁴ Pindar (c. 518-446) provides, I believe, the first explicit reference to the idea of a *psuchē* or *pneuma* as rising to heaven after death (O.II 56ff).

4. *Psuchē and the Presocratic Philosophers*

It is often said that the defining characteristic of Greek philosophy and science is the discovery of nature or *phusis*. The word *phusis* permitted the Milesians and their successors to present a new conception of the world in which natural causes were substituted for mythical or supernatural ones. Thus Thales (c. 624-545), Anaximander (c. 611-546), Anaximenes (c. 590-520), and Heraclitus (c. 540-480) all understood the universe to be wholly natural, beyond the control of human action (prayers, sacrifices) and the supernatural forces such actions presuppose. There is a de-personification of the entities behind or controlling the universe. The nature and behaviour of the universe are determined by the essential properties of the primary entities out of which it is composed.²⁵

What interests me here is the relation between *phusis* and *psuchē* from the Milesians to Plato. This will complement the various poetic and/or religious notions of the soul and the afterlife we reviewed earlier. All of these were circulating to various degrees in Plato's time. He is the first to give a comprehensive account of soul, which culminates in the *Laws* in the form of a critique of his predecessors.

In Plato's refutation of the atheistic materialists in *Laws* 10, he makes it clear that *phusis* is at the centre of the controversy. But *phusis* is inseparable from another key word in this debate. That term is *psuchē*. Plato's claims that his imaginary adversaries argue that *psuchē* is a *product* of what his adversaries understand by *phusis*, i.e. earth, air, fire, and water (*Lg.* 10.888e-889d). Plato claims *psuchē* is in fact the principle of movement (*archē kinēseōs*) and thus deserves to be identified with the original *phusis* rather than the four "soulless" elements. Plato's own analysis will provide him with a quasi scientific approach to the destiny of the soul after death, for there is also an intimate connection between *phusis*, *psuchē*, and *theos* or god, that is, a god who is by nature good and providential.

But how do we get there? Let's follow the thread.

The Milesians, the first philosophers, were all monists who believed that the world order (*kosmos*) emerged from a single material or natural principle: *phusis* as *archē*. Thales claimed it was water (*hudor*), Anaximander, the *apeiron* (an undifferentiated stuff), and Anaximenes, air (*aēr*).

In his *Physics* (3.203b6-15), Aristotle notes that Anaximander describes the *apeiron* as deathless and imperishable (*athanaton kai anōlethron*), as encompassing and steering all (*periechein hapanta kai panta kubernan*), and, as in fact divine (*theion*). Thales claimed that water, his original *phusis* or *archē*, was mixed with *psuchē* and thus literally alive. Moreover, he claimed that all was full of gods, which means, I assume, that like the gods, water is deathless and imperishable but also that water is divine because it somehow encompasses and steers all things (Aristotle, *de An.* 411a7-8 =DK11A23).²⁶ Anaximenes was

²⁵ I provide a detailed study of this notion in Naddaf 2005.

²⁶ Plato, referring no doubt to Thales, makes the same claim that "everything is full of gods" at the end of his argument for the immortality of the soul in *Laws* 10 (899b).

more explicit in his contentions. He claimed that “just as our *psuchē*, which is air (*aēr*) holds us together and controls us (*sugkratei hēmas*), so does breath (*pneuma*) and air (*aēr*) surround the entire *kosmos*” (DK13B2).²⁷ And Cicero (DK13A10) notes that Anaximenes claimed that air is a god (*theos*). There is much to be said here, but I’ll restrict myself to a few highlights. The Homeric *thumos* is now absorbed by the *psuchē* and thus *psuchē* designates the entire human personality. However, none of the Milesians make any claims about the immortality of the *individual* soul. And even if they did, by definition that soul would be *physical* in nature, as will be the case for *all* conceptions of the soul until Plato.

Let us now turn to some key references to *psuchē* in the Presocratics beginning with Heraclitus. In Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 540-480) we find, as Kahn (1979, 107) notes, the first extant literary example of *psuchē*, in the sense of a power of rational thought.²⁸ We also find in Heraclitus the first germs of *psuchē* having both a cognitive and corporeal function, albeit in both instances *psuchē* is still associated with the “physical.”²⁹ That he uses *psuchē* in the sense of “personal identity” seems clear when he famously uses the reflexive pronoun *emeōton* as soul: “I searched for myself” (*edizēsamēn emeōton*, 22B101). Moreover, *psuchai* take on different physical constitutions, depending on the kinds of lives they lived or, more precisely, their level of *consciously* understanding their relation to the universe.³⁰ It is unclear, however, that Heraclitus thought there is such a thing as *personal* survival after death.

Empedocles of Acragas (c. 492-432) comes across as a quirky mix of shaman and naturalist. He composed his works in hexameter verse,³¹ and he claims that they are derived from a god (*theou para muthos*, DK31B23.11).³² In no other Presocratic philosopher do we find so many references to reincarnation and metempsychosis, and these involve rebirth into a variety of living things, including bushes, birds, and fish in addition to humans (male and female), all of which he claims to have experienced (31B117). But Empedocles also claims

²⁷ Aristotle notes that some of the Pythagoreans identified soul with air (*de An.* 404a17 = DK58B40; see also 58B40 for the claim that the *kosmos* inhales the unlimited breath surrounding it). The Pythagoreans seem to draw their inspiration from Anaximenes, which may suggest that this belief was held by Pythagoras himself. It is certainly a ringing endorsement of the kinship of nature and thus an argument for metempsychosis.

²⁸ “Eyes and ears are poor witnesses for men if their souls (*psuchas*) do not understand the language” (DK22B107); 22B45 also suggests that *psuchē* is used in the context of personality.

²⁹ Kahn (1979, 238-39) sees no fundamental discontinuity between the realm of *psuchē* and the realm of elemental transformations (see, for example, 22B36). Heraclitus has what Kahn calls a “psychophysical theory of the universe” (1979, 249). How he imagines the universe as working is akin to what we find in Plato’s eschatological myth in *Laws* 10.

³⁰ There is some analogy here with what we find in Plato’s *Laws* 10.

³¹ This implies that they are thus meant to be sung as a kind of incantation.

³² The influence of the Orphics and/or Pythagoreans is omnipresent; for all intents and purposes, Empedocles is one!

to be a god (*theos*) living among mortals (DK31B112). More precisely, he is a fallen *daimon* or soul (B115.13). The fall from an initial happy existence is due to the cardinal sin of bloodshed (B115), which is part of the doctrines of both the Orphics and Pythagoreans. Salvation is ultimately contingent on strict adherence to the rules of purity *and* gaining an understanding of divine nature, which will result in escaping incarnation and rejoining the gods.

Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (c. 500-428) is of particular importance insofar as he was the first to introduce a single moving principle with attributes similar to what Plato characterizes as the “best soul” (*aristē psuchē*) in *Laws* 10. This cosmic principle, which Anaxagoras calls *nous* or mind/intelligence, is unmixed with other things, causes motion, knows all things, rules all things, and sets all things in order (DKB12). But the fact that Anaxagoras claims that *nous* is the finest and purest of all things still suggests he understands it as a corporeal entity (DK59B12.9-10).³³ The relation between mind and soul in Anaxagoras is, as Aristotle noted, unclear (*de An.* 404b1 and 405a13). But what is certain is that *nous* rules all things that possess soul (*psuchēn*) (DK59B12.6; B4.2). But all living things (i.e. all things that have *psuchē*) do not have an equal amount of *nous*. Living things with the lowest portion of *nous* only have the capacity to move whereas those with the highest portion also have the power to think. There is thus a hierarchy in nature, with humans at the top of the scale. As the source of *all* motion, *nous*, for Anaxagoras, thus has a dual function, similar to what Plato, in the *Laws*, attributes to soul as the principle of motion (*archē kinesēos*): it acts on inanimate things as an *external* force and on animate things as an *internal* force or faculty (see Naddaf 2005, 149-50). While *nous* is by definition immortal, there is no evidence in Anaxagoras that the individual soul survives after the dissolution of the body in which it resides.

Finally, there is Diogenes of Apollonia (c. 460-400), the late fifth-century material monist, who drew his inspiration from the Milesians. He argued that *aēr*, which is the *archē* of all things, is both intelligent *and* divine (*theos*) (DK61B5-7). Air is thus, unsurprisingly, the source of soul (*psuchē*) and intelligence (*noēsis*) in humans and other animals. In conjunction, he claims that air governs all things and not just human lives (B5). From this perspective, air organizes everything in the universe (B5). Everything is arranged, he claims, in the *best* possible way, including the seasons, night and day, etc. (B3), which fits well with the contention that air is god (B5). Diogenes thus has a teleological view of the order and functioning of the universe. However, Diogenes did not hypothesize the notion of a *final* cause, that is, a cause in which humans would recognize an idea of the good. To claim that the order in the universe is due to an intelligent and divine principle does not imply that this order comprises a divine *intention* on which the destiny of humanity depends. This may explain why we do not find in Diogenes (or any other Presocratic

³³ See Sedley (2007, 12).

philosopher), the idea that the gods care for us—a fundamental principle of Plato’s teleology. Plato borrows considerably from all of his predecessors, but his innovations—and those of Socrates too—are invariably iconoclastic. Let’s now turn to Plato’s notions of the soul, in particular as they relate to the afterlife and how they relate to the poetic tradition. I’m going to begin with the *Apology*.

5. *The Apology*

The *Apology* is the perfect place to begin an investigation of Plato’s developing notions of the soul because in it the ideas on death and the afterlife seem to be Socratic rather than Platonic. Socrates’ famous exhortation “to care for the soul” (*tēs psuchē epimeleisthai*) first appears in the *Apology* (29d-30b). What Socrates is proposing by this exhortation is a total reversal of values. In a world in which people considered money, reputation, and honour as the most important values or excellences (*aretai*) and thought a person should live his life in pursuit of them (29d-e), Socrates argued that what really mattered was care of one’s *psuchē* or soul—with the *psuchē* understood to be one’s “true self.”

The word *psuchē* meant something very different for the average Greek than it did for Socrates. People customarily associated *psuchē* with the popular Homeric notion of a “ghost-soul” or a “breath-soul” (see above), both of which were valueless without the body. It seems clear from the *Apology* that the majority of Greeks never connected *psuchē* with thought, emotion, or memory. There was simply, for many, no sense of a *conscious self* in opposition to the body. This, of course, raised the question of exactly what the adherents of the popular mystery religions thought was being “immortalized” after death. It also suggests that the various religious and philosophical positions in favor of the immortality of the soul were restricted to a small number of individuals or groups.

But to return to Socrates in the *Apology*. The Socratic exhortation to care for the self is connected with the famous Delphi maxim: “Know thyself!” (*gnōthi sauton*). In order to “know oneself,” one must submit to some kind of self-examination. This explains another famous Socratic contention that “the unexamined life is not worth living” (*ho de anexetastos bios ou biōtos anthrōpōi*, *Ap.* 38a, 29e). Socrates saw it as his divine mission to examine his own life and that of others. Philosophy was thus considered a “common search.” His preferred method of examination was elenchus, a type of cross-examination or questioning. Socrates’ method is not, of course, about formulating valid arguments but rather about making the interlocutor realize the arrogance of his presumption of knowledge. With that realization the interlocutor may become open to discerning the truth, that is, the need for self-examination or “introspection;” he may become conscious of himself and thus begin to take care of himself (*Ap.* 29d-e).³⁴

³⁴ Socrates notes on several occasions in the *Apology* that he is “conscious” that he knows that he is not wise (e.g. *emautōi sunēidē ouden epistamenōi*, 22c9; see also 21b4).

It is unclear *when* Socrates himself arrived at this discovery that the only real knowledge comes from within, through introspection. While so often claiming not to be wise, he was so convinced of his mission that he preferred death and danger to renouncing it. The norm, at least as it is presented in the *Apology*, was to consider death as the greatest of evils (29a). But, as Socrates notes, to fear death is to think one wise, because no one except god knows whether death may not be the greatest of blessings (29a).³⁵ After he is condemned to death, Socrates claims that there is good reason to hope that death is a blessing—in part because his famous *daimonion* or “divine sign” did not make him refrain from doing what he thought was right (40b).

Socrates thus proposes two possibilities about death (*Ap.* 40c-41c). The first is that death is like a dreamless sleep for all eternity. In Socrates’ case, this is premised on his firm conviction that he lived a just and noble life in the service of gods and men.³⁶ The second possibility has to do with life in Hades. Here Socrates imagines that he would encounter *true* judges and then go on to the ideal afterlife of pursuing the same mission he pursued on earth, that is, the philosophical examination of others, but now of the great heroes and poets of the past. It is interesting to what degree this is grounded in the Homeric notion. But it is as if the inhabitants of Hades are now a fusion of *thumos* and *psuchē*. They are not only *conscious* but also quasi-embodied souls.

6. *The Gorgias*

In Plato’s *Gorgias*, there is no argument for the immortality of the soul, but there is a myth (*muthos*) of the destiny of the soul after death (523a-526d). We can consider this as Plato’s own first attempt at an eschatological myth.

Before the *muthos* (523a2) begins, Socrates notes that “to arrive in Hades with one’s soul full of unjust actions is the ultimate of bad things” (522e). In Homer’s account of Hades, the state of one’s soul is entirely irrelevant. Indeed, at the opening of the *muthos* (523a-b), Plato attributes all sorts of claims to Homer that were simply not there (e.g. if one has lived a godless life, he goes to Tartarus to pay the penalty). It is as if Plato is using divine Homer to give credence to his own claims (see also 525d-e). He informs Callicles that what he has heard is true (*alēthē*, 523a; also 524b); then, on the basis of those accounts, he believes that death is nothing more than the separation of soul and body (*tēs psuchēs kai tou sōmatos*, 524b). Each soul, Socrates claims, is judged solely on its moral value without the judges knowing the person to whom it belongs (*ouk eidōs hotou estin*, 524e3). It no longer matters if one were a king or a peasant. As the king is without his clothes, nothing would be hidden!

³⁵ Plato later insists that there can be no demonstrations or *logoi* about what happens after death, only *muthoi*, “myths.”

³⁶ I am not aware of any previous claim to this novel notion of death as dreamless sleep, but I see the germs of it in several of the Presocratic philosophers, including Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, and Democritus.

According to Plato's theory of punishment presented here, punishment correctly inflicted should make one better. The person should thus profit from it, or at least others should profit when they *see* the person suffering, since fear may make them act properly (525b). This implies a notion of *free will*, but also of memory of what one has *seen* in previous lives. Those who can themselves profit are curables. As for the incurables, others can profit from their example. And so some incurables are *visibly* displayed for eternity suffering the most frightening ordeals so that the unjust men arriving in Hades will have warning of what may lie in store for their future lives (525c).³⁷ Given this affirmation of reincarnation, Socrates' position in the *Apology* of an eternal disembodied self would have been rather optimistic.³⁸

If the *Gorgias* was Plato's own first effort at an eschatological myth, the *Phaedo* is his second attempt, and it is preceded by several arguments for the immortality of the soul, which will become the hallmark of Plato's subsequent eschatological myths. These arguments are, in fact, the first of their kind in western philosophy. These *logoi* are meant to appeal to the *rational* part of the soul whereas the myths are meant to appeal to the *emotional* part.

7. *The Phaedo*

The *Phaedo* is a drama about the final hours and death of Socrates. The account is given by Phaedo, a disciple of Socrates who was with him when he died, to a group of Pythagoreans whose own themes, including those of transmigration and avoiding bodily contamination, are interlaced in Socrates' own account of the immortality of the soul.³⁹

In the *Phaedo*, we encounter for the first time Socrates' contention that the practice of philosophy is first and foremost a practice for death and dying. Death is the separation of the *psuchē* from the body, which the philosopher's soul disdains (65d).⁴⁰ The ultimate aim of the soul is the search for knowledge and truth, and the soul reasons best when it is not hampered by the bodily senses (65c, 80c, 82c). It is only with "pure thought" that the soul can track down its natural objects, that is, realities that are pure and by themselves, such as the Just itself, the Beautiful itself, and the Good itself (65d-66a). Complete knowledge, then, the ultimate aim of the soul, cannot be attained in this life. But if we have done all that is humanly possible to purify the soul from its bodily taint, when god frees our souls, we will be ready for the full revelation (67c). From this perspective, it would be absurd for a philosopher to fear death (67d-e).

³⁷ I do not follow Annas (1982, 123-25) who claims that the myth is akin to "the Christian myth in being a *last* judgement, which settles the fate of each person once and for all."

³⁸ Plato takes great pains to account for the difference between a body and a soul. And he is clear that the disembodied soul he describes is what goes to Hades. But his description of souls as seeing and hearing, etc. in Hades, still suggests a quasi-embodied soul.

³⁹ Plato makes it clear the Pythagoreans and Orphics are an inspiration for him. In *Phaedo* 69c-d he makes the claim that those who established *teletai* or initiations, including a mention of the *bacchoi*, have pursued philosophy in the correct way.

⁴⁰ The soul is described as imprisoned in the body as if in a cage (82e) and that it seeks to be by itself (*autē kath' autēn*, 65d1).

In the *Phaedo*, Plato thinks of the true self as reason or intellect alone. As Sorabji correctly notes, “this raises the worry whether the true self is sufficiently individual. Do we differ from each other in our reason/intellect in distinctive ways?” (2008, 17). Plato seems conscious of a contrast between the true self and individuality in the *Alcibiades* (130d). On this, to know ourselves would be to know our souls as particular selves, which appears to be the position in the *Phaedo* at 115c (see also *R.* 9.589a-d). But something else of importance here is that Plato at this stage still has not figured out how to reconcile body and soul; they are still independent entities. Only in the *Phaedrus* does he finally find a solution with soul as the principle of all motion, bodily and psychic.

As I mentioned previously, the *Phaedo* offers the first arguments in Western philosophy for the immortality of the soul. All of Plato’s eschatological myths from here on will be preceded by such arguments. They are indeed a hallmark of Plato. Socrates provides four arguments for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*: the argument from cyclical processes (69e-72e); from recollection (72e-80d); from affinity (80d-84b); and from opposites (102a-107b). It is not my intention here to discuss these arguments. But let me make a couple of remarks before turning to the eschatological myth. The four arguments complement one another, and Plato seems well aware that any one argument cannot stand alone (e. g. 77c, 84c-d).

The famous Forms are first mentioned at 65d, that is, prior to the arguments for the immortality of the soul. The doctrine of eternal forms is actually never argued for but is rather taken for granted (65d), and yet the equally famous doctrine of *anamnēsis* (or learning as recollection, 72e) is dependent on them, and the idea that the soul is immortal is in turn dependent here as it was in the earlier *Meno* (81c-d) on the doctrine of recollection (72e-73a; soul and Forms have the same attributes, 66a, 80b).⁴¹ What is new in the *Phaedo* is that we obtain knowledge of Forms in this life through their physical manifestations, which resemble them but which are never complete. As we become conscious of a particular Form in our mind, say the Form of Beautiful, we are aware that, for example, the beautiful iris is only an imperfect copy, and we can not say “x is an imperfect copy of y” unless one had prior knowledge of y (74d-e). In sum, knowledge is latent in incarnate man. We should note that the notion that the soul is precious is different here from Socrates’ contention in the *Apology*. In the *Apology*, the idea was that we should care for our soul because it was the source of knowledge; in the *Phaedo*, we should care for our soul because it belongs to the world of eternal forms.

⁴¹ Although the *Meno* does not explicitly mention the Forms, the doctrine of recollection there, as here, is dependent on them. They stand or fall together and with them the notion that the soul is immortal. In both the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, the accent is on prenatal knowledge.

After the arguments for the immortality of the soul are finished (107b), Socrates claims that the soul must thus be cared for, not only in this life but for all time (107c). He then begins the eschatological myth:⁴² when the soul goes to Hades, it will arrive there “possessing nothing but its education and upbringing” (107d), and it will suffer its appropriate fate. We then have a vivid description of the underworld. There is little doubt that this description has been much influenced by traditional accounts, including Pythagorean and Orphic, but Plato reshapes the material to make it also conform to the dramatic and discursive context of the dialogue. Once again, for Plato, only myths can describe what happens in the afterlife. A reasoned discourse can not fulfill this function. The dead are each assigned a daimon who leads them to the place of judgment in the underworld (108a, 113d). As in the *Gorgias*’ myth, there are three main groups consisting of incurables, curables, and philosophers. Some curables are purified by penalties for their injustices immediately. But there is also a separate category of curables, including those who have committed a major crime (e. g. striking a parent in a fit of rage) but have felt remorse thereafter. In this case, they must seek forgiveness in Hades from those they have wronged and until they receive this forgiveness, they must remain there (114a-b). It is as if we can imagine Odysseus wandering around in Hades until Ajax finds it in his heart to forgive him (*Od.* 11.542-60). Then there are those who are deemed incurable because of the extreme gravity of the crime—for example, wicked and unlawful murders. They are flung to Tartarus never to emerge (113e). But there are also some, who having lived an extremely pious life, return to the surface of the pure earth in new bodies (*Phd.* 114e). Finally, there are those who lived the life of philosophy, whose souls are so pure that they get to live *without a body* in a beautiful dwelling place characterized as hard to describe (*Phd.* 114e). Since reincarnation is very much a part of Plato’s eschatology, it would seem that only the curables will return to the earth, reincarnated into humans or other animals, corresponding to the kinds of lives they have led (see 82a-b). Thus if one lived like a donkey, one will transmigrate into a donkey in one’s next existence. There is no reference to free will in choosing a future life.

At the end of this eschatological *muthos* (114d8), Socrates claims that no reasonable man (*noun echonti andri*, d2) would insist that his description of Hades is factual because it could not, of course, be verified. But taking it as true is both a reasonable contention and a belief worth the risk, he claims, because the evidence is clear (*painetai ousa*, d4) that the soul itself is immortal (*athanaton*, d4). And Plato insists that a man should repeat this account (the *muthos* and the *logos*) to himself as if it were an incantation (*epaidein*, d7). Incantations, which are to have a magical effect, are generally meant to be sung!

⁴² The word *muthos* is used at 110b1 and 114d8. Plato uses the word *logos* in the same sense, I believe, at 108d8. There is also a shorter account of what happens in Hades at *Phd.* 80d-82b, where he also describes what impure souls confront in Hades. Here, the worse and the best souls reincarnate into the animals they lived like (81e-82a).

8. *The Republic*

In the *Republic*, it is again the human *psuchē* which is Plato's primary focus. In it he provides a description of soul that is radically different from what we find in the *Phaedo*. There, the soul was *simple*, but in the *Republic* it is composite, tripartite to be exact. Briefly, Plato argues that the individual soul has the same three parts (*tritta genē*, 435b5 or *eidē*, 435e2) and characteristics (*ēthē*, 435e2) as the city (*en tēi polei*, 435e3). These are the appetitive part, the spirited part, and the rational part, which correspond to the productive class, the military class, and the ruling class (440e-441a). Justice, which is the primary theme of the dialogue, consists of each of the three parts performing the function that nature (*phusis*) meant it to perform (441d, 443d).⁴³

Plato does not address the notion that the soul is immortal until the end of the *Republic* (608d), and, once again, his arguments are followed by an eschatological myth (begins 614a). One argument could be called the argument from specific evil (608d-610e). For everything, he claims, there is a natural specific evil—for example, wood will rot, metals will rust. But if there is anything with a specific evil that does not destroy it, then it must be imperishable. The soul has its own specific evil, which is injustice, but although injustice corrupts it, it does not destroy it; therefore, soul must be immortal.

Plato previously argued that soul is composite, but now he is aware that there is a problem here. How can something composite be immortal (611b)? He resolves this by claiming that only the rational part, which is akin to the divine, is immortal (611e-612a). But it is difficult to make this claim. In what respects would it then constitute the *true self* in terms of individuality, and be different from other selves?

After his argument for the immortality of the soul, which Plato contends can only be done through logical reasoning (*logismōi*, 611c4), he turns to a description of what happens to just and unjust souls after death, which requires a tale (*apologos*, 614b2; *muthos*, 621b8): the famous Myth of Er (R. 10.614a-621d), named after the person who was killed in battle but who revives and then relates what he *saw and heard* in the world beyond (614b). The world below is described in colourful detail. It is indeed brought to life—one of the primary characteristics of myth: we once again find judges in the underworld. There is once again the distinction between curable and incurable sinners (generally, once again, tyrants). And philosophers again get the ultimate reward.

The myth also emphasizes the notion of *free will*. All souls have a choice to fare well or ill in the next life; indeed, each gets to choose its guardian spirit (617d). In fact, souls get to freely choose the kind of life they wish to live in the next incarnation from a wide range of choices, but they also get to *see* the consequences of their choices *before* they reincarnate and approve or disapprove of them. The moral, or one of them, is never rush a decision, always weigh the pros and cons before you act. Our choices will ultimately determine our happiness or unhappiness, and since philosophers are trained to make the best choices—indeed, it is in their nature to do so—

⁴³ Plato interestingly contends at 441e that a mixture of music and poetry is fundamental in harmonizing the rational and spirited parts.

they alone will obtain the maximum amount of happiness in the next life. But there is no indication that even philosophers will escape the cycle once and for all. Indeed, there is no indication that souls are anything but composite. Even to have lived under an orderly constitution and participated in virtue through *habit* is no guarantee that one will make a good choice for the next life. Plato claims this is the case because such souls were untrained in suffering (619c-d).

Metempsychosis is also again in the picture, with animals representing both noble and ignoble choices (620a-c). The choices of some were determined by the character in their former lives (620a). Before souls take up their new births, they must all drink from the fountain of Forgetfulness, although some, for lack of reason, drink more than they should (621a).⁴⁴ Er, for his part, was not allowed to drink.

9. *The Phaedrus*

The eschatological myth in the *Phaedrus* (246a-249d) once again follows an argument for the immortality of the soul (245e-246a). But this time, the argument or demonstration (*apodexis*, 245c5) is fundamentally different from previous arguments. It is also surprisingly succinct for Plato. The previous arguments focused on human souls. The argument here focuses on soul, as the source and principle of *all* motion (*archē kinēseōs*).⁴⁵ It runs more or less as follows: a principle is something ungenerated, for a principle cannot come from nothing or else it would not be a principle; and a principle is also indestructible because if the principle were destroyed, nothing could come to be from it, including itself. Therefore, to define *psuchē* as the principle of motion is to affirm, on the one hand, that soul moves itself and that it moves other things and, on the other hand, that it is immortal because this motion cannot stop without causing all motion to stop. Motion here is understood in a broad sense to include not only *all* kinds of physical motion but also *all* kinds of psychic motion (245e).

Plato then turns to the structure or form (*idea*, 246a4) of the soul (in this case, the human soul), that is, how it appears to us. He claims that only a god could give a true description or representation. Plato can only provide a human one and here this can be done only in the form of a *muthos* (253c8). Again, we find Plato's fertile imagination at work. The soul is compared to a team of winged horses and their charioteer (246a-b). The horses of the gods are good and of good stock while the rest are mixed, with one obedient horse and one headstrong horse making the task for the driver difficult. This also suggests that souls are composite—indeed, tripartite as in the *Republic*.

Wings are what characterize the divine and when they are in perfect condition, that is, when they are nourished with beauty, wisdom, and goodness, they can transport their souls to the outer rim of the heavens where the souls can gaze upon what is beyond

⁴⁴ Plato says that souls must spend one thousand years in the underworld between reincarnations (615a).

⁴⁵ The argument here is close to what the first philosophers (see above) understood, at least implicitly, by *psuchē*.

heaven.⁴⁶ Here, we find the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to *nous*, the pilot of the soul (247c). This is what nurtures the souls of the gods. Human souls, for their part, troubled by their horses, can only apprehend these realities with difficulty and in varying degrees.

Reincarnation is directly related to how much truth the human souls have seen, on the one hand, and on their level of forgetfulness and wrongdoing, on the other (248c). In this eschatological myth and in subsequent ones, there is no reference to judges in the afterlife but there are rewards and punishments, which, according to the life one led, may lead to heaven or the underworld. Heaven as a reward for a just life is now explicitly mentioned. Moreover, there are, once again, references to transmigration, but restricted to souls who never saw the truth (249b). On the other hand, the process of recollection of reality is the only guarantee of attaining the best life (249c). It is unclear here, as in Plato's other eschatological myths, where the process of reincarnation begins. It is as if the universe did not have a beginning in time. Reincarnation simply always was and always will be. In the *Timaeus*, to which I now turn, Plato provides us with a temporal starting point.

10. *The Timaeus*

The *Timaeus*, Plato's creation story, is an account or myth of generations, the generation of the universe, of mankind, and of society. It thus fits into a long tradition of these myths or divinely inspired songs (*Ti.* 26c-27d). Plato is here continuing a tradition—what I call the *peri phuseōs* tradition—which is found in both the Presocratic physicists and in their poetic predecessors, such as Hesiod. This tradition, which is lost in time, seeks to explain how the present order of reality originated and developed from primordial chaos (Naddaf 2005).

Plato calls his creation story an *eikōs muthos* or likely story. Plato was obviously not there to witness the origin of humanity let alone the origin of the universe. Such a discourse can only be related, in his eyes, as a myth. This explains why the philosopher, like the poet, must call upon the gods (or the Muses) to inspire his account or song (*Ti.* 27c-d).

In many respects, the *Timaeus* is the first *creationist* account of the *peri phuseōs* type. Prior to Plato evolutionism was the norm. A narrative of the creationist type requires above all that a creator god, the demiurge, be present prior to the constitution of the universe and that this god be independent of matter. Since this demiurge relies on *technē*, everything in the world must be the consequence of a divine intention.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Plato claims the earthly poets have never sung (*humnēse*) or will never get to sing (*humnēsei*) the praises of the real world enough (*Phaedrus* 247c). Here I just want to stress once again the importance of the poets and singing, and singing of these extraordinary events.

⁴⁷ Sedley (2007, Chapter 1) makes a good case for Anaxagoras as the first champion of a “creative cosmic intelligence” (8-9). I make a somewhat similar claim for Anaxagoras in Naddaf (2005, 148-51). In the *Ti.* however, Plato is not only more

This brings us to the notion of *psuchē* again. Plato does not provide an argument for the immortality of the soul in the *Timaeus*, which is in keeping with the fact that his account is a *muthos*.⁴⁸ But ironically, it is in the *Timaeus* that Plato provides us with his most coherent account of soul and a solution to an irreconcilable dualism between mind and matter. He accomplishes this by affirming, first, that soul, as the principle of motion, is closely connected with the movements of the body; next, that there can no more be an intellect without a soul than there can be a soul without a body, such that the world soul, whose end is to be self-moving, contemplates the ideas and thus everlastingly continues in an orderly movement; and finally, that the world soul and the individual souls are constituted of a mixture of three ingredients (Existence, Sameness, and Otherness), intermediary between the sensible and intelligible worlds. This explains how the soul can know the objects of both worlds.

In the *Timaeus*, we are told that it is the Demiurge who creates soul, including individual human souls—the number of which correspond to the number of stars (see *Ti.* 41d-e).⁴⁹ After these souls are created, we are told that the Demiurge sowed some in the earth, some in the moon, and some in all the other “instruments of time” (42d).

Before the intervention of the lesser gods, it would seem that *human* souls would have been indistinguishable from one another. This is the point zero of transmigration. It is only after these *human* souls take up residence in *human* bodies that they develop *individual* personalities. In the *Timaeus*, we are told that the newly created souls are shown the nature of the universe and the laws of destiny (*nomous tous eimarmenous*, *Ti.* 41e; see also *Lg.* 904c, also *Phdr.* 249aff), that is, how they can be promoted and demoted in future reincarnations according to their character, which is determined essentially with how we deal with the disturbances associated with having a body (42a-b, 44a-b). But humans as rational animals also have free will (42a). Plato is quite clear that god is not responsible for any evils they may bring upon themselves (42d-e).⁵⁰

explicit and descriptive from the beginning to end, but he puts the accent on the *intentionality* of the demiurge/*nous* for the first time.

⁴⁸ Nonetheless, Brisson and Meyerstein have correctly noted that, in the *Ti.* Plato employs for the first time the method which was to be employed in any research which pretends to be *scientific*: a list of axioms and rules of inference (1991, 10-11).

⁴⁹ This, of course, has been the subject of considerable controversy from antiquity to the present. Indeed, until here—and this will also be the case in the *Lg.*—soul was said to be ungenerated. The most common solution is to argue that Plato meant the *Ti.* to be taken figuratively rather than literally.

⁵⁰ There is thus no *original* sin, which we found associated, in particular, with Orphic and Pythagorean myths of which Plato was well aware. Since human souls are indestructible, reincarnation can and will go on for eternity.

After Timaeus completes his discourse on the physical constitution of man, which follows that of the universe, Plato explains the general principles of education (44a-b, 86b-90d), the *sine qua non* of man's salvation. In the final analysis, there must be a perfect equilibrium between the movements of the soul and those of the body and, within the human soul, a perfect equilibrium between its parts, with preeminence given to the intellect (87c-90d). This can be assured if the intellect contemplates the movements of the celestial bodies, for they provide the model for our well-being (89d-90d).

11. *The Laws*

In the *Timaeus*, the generation of the cosmos is a mixed result of a combination of Reason (*nous*) and Necessity (*anankē*). The demiurge, who incarnates *nous*, is not omnipotent but had to create the universe from a preexisting material—what exists of Necessity—which constitutes an obstacle to its desire that the cosmos attain the immutable perfection of the intelligible model. The demiurge was nevertheless able to subjugate Necessity by wise persuasion (*hupo peithous emphronos*) to direct most of the things that come to be toward what is *best* (*epi to beltiston again*, *Timaeus* 48a). The legislator in the *Laws*, like the demiurge in the *Timaeus*, must also work with preexisting materials, that is, human souls, that are also hard to manage (858b). Moreover, he also claims to be living in a world where human affairs seem to be at the mercy of *tuchē* or chance (709b), but he then claims that, on reflection, there are three factors that govern human affairs: god, chance, and opportunity (*kairos*) assisted by skill or *technē* (709b-c).⁵¹

What we have in the *Laws* is Plato's conception of the second best state, which is called Magnesia. The philosopher king is no longer a real option. Indeed, Plato is now of the opinion that absolute power corrupts (712a, 875b-c). The philosopher kings should be replaced with the rule of law—but with laws considered as objective and timeless truths (772c; 798b1, 846c7 etc.). This would work best, he insists, in a mixed constitution, that is, a mixture of democracy and monarchy. But Plato's state is often characterized as theocratic although he does not use this term. Indeed, the first word of the *Laws* is *theos*, and it turns out to be the foundation of Platonic legislation. The opening remarks take for granted that law codes are of divine rather than human origin, and there is no suggestion that this is not the case, until we arrive at other strong opinions in Book 10. Plato must then demonstrate what was taken for granted until then, that is, that the gods exist, care for us, and are incorruptible. Indeed, throughout, the gods

⁵¹ The legislative *technē*, as Plato sees it, is not only grounded in divine reason or *nous* but is also the result of chance and necessity, of trial and error, of social, environmental, and technological factors. As the Athenian notes at the beginning of *Lg.* 3, the purpose of investigation is to discover the cause of change in human affairs (676c). For a good discussion, see Nightingale (1999, 299-325).

become the guarantors of the law code, which is at the foundation of the new state. The legislator of the *Laws* (Plato/the Athenian) is also working with the assumption that he is divinely inspired—and at one point is said to be a divinely inspired poet (*Lg.* 818a, 769d-e, 632c)! But unlike legislators and poets who until then claimed to be divinely inspired, the Athenian insists throughout that he is indeed working with divine reason (*nous*). Unsurprisingly, *theos* and *nous* are later used interchangeably (713a), such that theocracy and noocracy mean the same thing.⁵²

Plato is well aware of his innovation in legislative matters. He claims to be the first to combine persuasion and force (722b-c). To realize this ideal, the text of the law and the law code in general must be preceded by a preamble (*prooimion*). For Plato, a preamble is first and foremost an “exhortation” (*paramuthia*, 720a1). Using a play on words, Plato assimilates the exhortation (*paramuthia* or *paramuthion*) to “a myth which precedes the law” (*ho pro tou nomou muthos*, *Lg.* 927c7-8). And this comparison, as Brisson notes, is supported by fourteen occasions in the *Laws*, including as we will see, the preamble relative to the existence of god and divine providence in *Laws* 10 (887d2 and 903b1).⁵³

Until *Laws* 10, there is no indication that the divinely inspired law code, which consists of timeless and objective truths, would be confronted with any serious opposition. Indeed, no one would voluntarily commit an unholy act in word or deed, the Athenian insists, unless (1) they did not believe in the existence of the gods, or (2) believed that the gods exist but do not care for us, or (3) believed that they are corruptible (885b).⁵⁴ We learn that there are, in fact, different groups of individuals who maintain these three heresies.⁵⁵ Plato argues that these individuals would not be satisfied with anything less than a demonstration (*apodexis*, 887a, 893b; *epidexis* 892c, 899d), based on arguments (*logoi*, 887a) that would be acceptable by all. He is well aware that his young (*neoi*) adversaries would never accept the notions of a demiurge, eternal forms, or any claim to recollection. Moreover, he describes them as being gifted with strong memories and penetrating minds (*mnēmai te ischurai kai mathēsis oxeia parōsi*, 908c3), which are some of the most important attributes that Plato sees in a potential benevolent dictator (see *Lg.* 709e-710a, 710c, and *R.* 487a). And to insist on the fundamental importance of his enterprise, Plato contends that his arguments against the three forms of impiety would constitute the best and finest preamble the entire legislation could have (*hapantōn tōn nomōn kalliston te kai ariston prooimion an eiē*, 887c1-2).

⁵² This also follows from the myth of Cronos, 713a-714a.

⁵³ See Brisson (1998, 120-21 and Appendix IV) and also Morgan (2000, 165), who cites Brisson.

⁵⁴ Plato cites the same three forms of impiety at *R.* 356d-e in reference to those who claim that injustice is more profitable than justice.

⁵⁵ The third heresy was, in some respects, even more contemptible for Plato than the two others. He addresses it at 716d-717a and, of course, 905d-907a.

Before Plato begins his arguments, he notes with some anger and frustration that this would not have been necessary, had the youth (*neoi*) in question been persuaded by the myths (*ou peithoumenoi tois mulhois*, 887d1) they heard from their mothers and nurses when they were toddlers. These myths, he continues, were recited like incantations (*epōidais*, d4), partly for amusement and partly in earnest. They were heard in prayers at sacrifices to the gods and seen in the form of acted representation (*opsis*, 887d6).⁵⁶ Obviously, something has gone wrong. We learn that it was not because the young could not control their appetites (886a-b). It is because they have been led astray by a *modern* theory (or rather a “surprising theory,” *thaumaston logon*, 886d9), which argues that the present order of things emerged by chance (*tuchēi*) from four primary inanimate (*apsucha*) elements or principles: earth, air, water, and fire (889b). This is what Plato’s adversaries understand by *phusis* (891c).⁵⁷ Two corollaries that follow from this theory are that *nous*, *psuchē*, and *technē* developed late, and that gods and laws are human conventions (889c-890a).

In order to demonstrate divine existence and providence—the true guarantors for the state and its laws—Plato has recourse to versions of two famous arguments: the cosmological and the physico-theological/teleological. He is, in fact, the first to employ them. Plato uses the cosmological argument to show that the soul (*psuchē*), which his adversaries hold to be a product posterior to the four elements, is in fact prior to them. Indeed, Plato who understands by *phusis* the primary source of generation (as do the materialists, 892c), connects *phusis* more with soul than with the four soulless (*apsucha*) elements. Soul is movement that moves itself (as we see in the *Phdr.*), and only such a movement can be the primary source of generation; for it is prior, in existence and in dignity, to the series of movements transmitted by bodies. Consequently, if the universe was really generated (something all his predecessors maintained), it is impossible according to Plato that the present order of things was able to emerge from its initial state without the initial impetus of a moving principle, a principle which is identified with *phusis* as *archē* and which, if it were to cease to act, would bring about the end of the universe (*Laws* 895a5-b1).⁵⁸ In short, without soul, the primordial state of things would forever remain inert. After examining soul from the motor function, Plato then turns to the cognitive function (as the seat of thought, deliberation, and will). Just as the motor function of soul is prior to the attributes of body (like hot, cold, wet, and dry), so too are the cognitive functions of soul prior to these attributes.

⁵⁶ Incantations are ritual formulas that are sung during religious ceremonies and are understood as putting the participants in contact with the occult powers. The action exerted on the soul during the communication of a myth is also associated with a magical charm (*kēlēsis*) and incantation (*epōidē* *Lg.* 659e, *Phd.* 77e-78a and 114d, *Euthd.* 289e).

⁵⁷ I understand this theory as belonging to no one in particular, but as an amalgamation of different theories in circulation at the time.

⁵⁸ Plato also connects *psuchē* with life; that is, when an object moves itself, he notes, we say it is alive (*zēn*) and if it is alive, we say it has soul (895c). This connects with the notion of soul already in vogue with the Milesians.

However, this first argument is not sufficient, for soul is not the supreme principle that Plato has in mind when he thinks of god. Soul is neutral and as such it is susceptible to good or evil, depending on the circumstances. Now since god or the divine is by nature good, Plato must determine which principle will assure in a permanent way the goodness of the soul. This principle, Plato argues, is *nous* (intelligence), which is exhibited in the harmony it establishes and sustains in the visible motion of the natural world (897b-898b; *Laws* 12.966e).

This, however, remains to be demonstrated, and doing so is precisely the aim of the physico-teleological argument. For Plato, this demonstration depends essentially on one thing: its ability to prove that the movements of the heavenly bodies are of the same nature as those of *nous*, that is, circular, uniform, and constant (898a-b; this simile is taken from a previous classification of movements at 893d). But how does one go about this? Plato supposes that a simple observation of the heavenly bodies will suffice to convince one that their movements and those of the intellect (*nous*) are identical and, consequently, that it is the *aristē psuchē* (identified with god) which cares for the entire universe (897c, 898c).⁵⁹

This is, in fact, contingent on what Plato calls the new astronomy—a science he now claims is “noble, true, beneficial to society and completely acceptable to God” (*Laws* 821a-b; also 966e-977c).⁶⁰ However, in reality the demonstration is much more complex. The observation of the sky (that is, observational astronomy) reveals that the movements of the heavenly bodies are not regular but wandering. Mathematical astronomy, on the other hand, can show that the heavenly bodies move in circles or, what amount to the same thing, intelligently. Indeed, in *Laws* 7.821e Plato affirms that the paradox of the irregular motion of bodies has only recently been resolved thanks to the new astronomy.⁶¹

After claiming, as Thales did, that it follows that “everything is full of gods” (*theōn einai plērē panta*, 899b8), Plato turns his sights to those who claimed that the gods do not care for us. He begins by claiming that the infidel just needs some gentle persuasion (*paramuthēton*, 899d5), but then proceeds to demonstrate (*endeixasthai*: 900c7) the providential nature of god by means of arguments (*logoi*: 899d, 900b5, 900b7, 903a10) acceptable to everyone. These arguments are corollaries to the cosmological and teleological proofs we have just considered.

⁵⁹ Plato implies here that there is thus a hierarchy of ontological principles or, which amounts to the same thing, a hierarchy of *phuseis*: *nous*, *psuchē*, and *hulē*. For the materialists, both *nous* and *psuchē* were late products of what the materialists considered *phusis*. And, of course, god and laws too! They were considered human conventions.

⁶⁰ Plato suggests here, as he explicitly noted in the *Ti.* (38b-c, 47a-c), that the *aristē psuchē* via the regular and uniform motions of the heavenly bodies has given us the ability to invent number, which in turn led to the notion of time and with it the road to investigating the nature of the universe and, indeed, the gift of philosophy itself.

⁶¹ Plato goes so far as to claim that astronomy is the science that everyone should study (at least to a certain degree) from youth, but more importantly, the science without which a happy social existence is impossible (992a). I discuss this in context in a forthcoming essay entitled “Cosmological Models and the *Peri Phuseōs* Tradition” in *The Edinburgh Critical History of Greek and Roman Philosophy* (ed. Giuseppe Cambiano and Alexandra Lianeri).

Briefly, the argument runs as follows. The gods are attentive to important matters, which follows from the physico-teleological argument. But are they also attentive to less important matters, namely human affairs? The gods, he claims, are by nature good and virtuous and therefore personify the virtues of moderation, courage, and intelligence, while vice is foreign to their nature. If a human is assigned a special task and neglects small things because he is preoccupied with his major duties, it must be because of one of two things: either he thinks it is of no importance to his job or he is simply lazy. Now everyone agrees, Plato claims, that the gods know, see, and hear all things (901d). If, therefore, the gods neglect tiny details in the universe it is either because they are unaware that such details need their attention or because they lack the knowledge of them. But this is impossible given that they know, hear, and see all things. Moreover, humans who practice a *technē* know that small details can never be overlooked. Thus, for example, a mason knows that big stones do not lie well without smaller ones (902e). Since god is supremely wise and willing and able to superintend the universe (903a), we can conclude that he looks after the small as well as the large details.⁶²

12. *The Eschatological Myth in Laws 10*

Up to this point Plato insists that he has been using arguments (*logoi*, 903a10) to make his case. He now contends that the young man (*neanian*, 903b4) may still be in need of some myths by way of charms (*epoidōn ge mēn prosdeisthai moi dokei muthōn eti tinōn*, 903b1-2).

The eschatological myth in *Laws* 10, which must be used as a “magical charm,” is based on a thesis that explains how the “supervisor of the universe” (*tōi tou pantos epimeloumenō*, 903b4-5) has arranged all things with an eye to its preservation and excellence. All parts, no matter how small, have either active or passive functions, and *archontes* or governors have been assigned to each and every one. The young man is reminded that he himself, a mere speck, nonetheless contributes, as in the case of anything generated (*genesis*), to the good of the whole, that is, to assure the felicity of the entire universe. But he is also reminded of his position by virtue of having a common origin (*tēs koinēs geneseōs*, d2-3) with the universe. Plato again uses the example of a craftsman. Just as a craftsman arranges his materials in view of the best *telos*; the young man is analogous to a material that shares with others a common purpose.⁶³

Plato then mentions the role of reincarnation (903d4-5). Since the human soul is by definition immortal, it is allied with different bodies at different times, and it is thus constantly subject to all sorts of different changes, some self-imposed and others due

⁶² Plato’s claim that everyone believes the gods see hear and know all things is premised on his conviction that the atheistic materials have now been refuted.

⁶³ It is difficult not to think of the *Ti.* here (30c-31a), where the human species is also included in the Form of the Living Creature. The contention here is that the universe is *not* anthropocentric, as in the biblical account, where universe is created with humanity in mind.

to the actions of other souls (903d4-5).⁶⁴ But Plato insists that the divine demiurge here acts like a player of checkers or draughts (*tōi peteutēi*, 903 d-6-7),⁶⁵ knowing how to move the character of a promising soul to a better location and a deteriorating one to an inferior location, according to the sort of position or fate (*moiras*) it deserves. It all happens quite mechanically!

I take the next controversial paragraph (903e2-904a4), which seems to explain how the universe functions, to be Plato's interpretation and critique of Heraclitus, as some have suggested, and a reference to his own view of the transformation of matter, which is akin to the one he described in the *Timaeus*. Indeed, in the *Timaeus*, he claims to be the first to explain the origin of the four elements (48b), which for Plato are formed from two types of elementary triangles: the isosceles and the scalene (53a-64a).⁶⁶

He then describes (904a6-c3) what the king (*ho basileus*, a6) of the universe saw when souls were first incarnated. In the *Timaeus*, both soul and matter are indestructible. In the case of matter, on death the elements of which the human body is composed disperse to their natural locations in the universe. There is a kind of natural law at work. It is only when the soul is incarnated that its actions involve virtue or vice. This is what the king saw or rather understood *in advance*. We saw in the *Timaeus* that the demiurge revealed the laws of destiny to the human souls *before* they were incarnated for the first time. Now we learn that the king/demiurge worked out in advance or rather had to work out in advance a scheme to assure that virtue would always triumph in the universe (904a-b). But the king also made sure that we are responsible for our own actions; that the cause (*aitia*) of change in our souls and the direction they will take after death resides entirely within us (*tais boulēsesin hekastōn hēmon tas aitias*, 904c1-2). The demiurge/king only assures that a soul's final location will contribute to the triumph of virtue in the universe.⁶⁷ It all happens according to the ordinance and law of destiny (*kata tēn tēs eimarmenēs taxin kai nomon*, 904b7-8).⁶⁸

After death, souls move mechanically to particular locations (*topoi*, 904b9, d2, d8, e1, 905b1, c2,) in *physical space* (*chōra*, 904c9) according to the lives they lived. If, during its earthly life, the soul has only experienced minor character changes, it will move horizontally in space (*to tēs choras epipedon*, 904c9). If it led a truly unjust life, it will set out on the path to the depths of Hades, that is, in the lower regions (*topoi*) of the universe (904d). Alternatively, if it led a life of divine

⁶⁴ The distinction of movements (to move and to be moved), which was applied to bodies at *Lg.* 894b-c, is also valid for *all* souls. Soul as a self-mover, moreover, is also said to adapt to all active and passive processes (896e-897c).

⁶⁵ For the draught player, see Nightingale (1999, 320).

⁶⁶ For a good description of the transformation of matter in Plato, see Vlastos (1975, Chapter 3).

⁶⁷ As P.-M. Schuhl (1947, 105-8) so aptly puts it, the supervisor of universe is understood as merely weighing the souls.

⁶⁸ Plato summarizes at 904c the three positions he defends in this myth: 1) all things that have soul Change; 2) the cause of this change resides in our choices; 3) in changing, the soul moves in conformity with the ordinance and law of destiny (after death).

virtue, it will follow a holy path to a higher or superior region (*topos* 904d8; see 904b). The soul thus moves to that area of *physical space* that corresponds to the character for which it has assumed responsibility during its life (904e6-905a1). Punishment and destiny are in a certain sense natural (904e7).

Although Plato insists in a final diatribe that there is no escape for a young impious lad (905b-c), the description of “divine” retribution for impiety and injustice in this life is anything but terrifying. There are no references to any gruesome punishments in the afterlife, no references to eternal damnation (or eternal bliss, for that matter), no references to metempsychosis for the first time, no references to recollection and, of course, to the world of Forms. The language of this eschatological myth, as some scholars have noted, is more “scientific” than “mythical.”⁶⁹ This is a long way from Plato’s description of *post-mortem* existence in the other eschatological myths and constitutes a kind of culmination of these myths that we have passed in review.

13. Conclusion

One position that returns in Plato’s eschatological myths is the importance of free will, which entails that our ultimate destiny both before and after death resides within ourselves. But in Plato’s ideal societies it is always difficult to grasp to what degree we are free moral agents; indeed, to what degree he wants us to be free moral agents. In conjunction, I would like to end with a few words on the *Laws*. Plato claims that legislation should have one *telos* in view, namely, *aretē* or virtue (*Lg.* 630a-b, 631a, 643e, 963a). Thus, education (*paideia*) must be a training in virtue from childhood in view of becoming a perfect citizen (*erastēn politēn*, 643e). Virtue is about channeling the feelings of pleasure and pain in the right direction (653d). Indeed, he claims that when men investigate legislation, they investigate almost exclusively how pleasures and pains affect society and the character of the individual (636d). Humans have non rational tendencies to seek pleasure and avoid pain (875b). But the gods, he argues, have provided humans with a number of gifts to control these irrational elements. The most important one, or so it seems, is reason (714a; also 654a). Laws are dispensations of reason (714a). But it is unclear to what degree a citizen can exercise critical reasoning on which “free will” can be truly exercised. Indeed, in the *Laws*, Plato is first and foremost a leader of souls (*psuchagogia*) and the legislation one vast system of total persuasion. It is “the climatic fulfilment,” as Morrow puts it, “of the art of psychagogy.”⁷⁰ And while there is no mention in the

⁶⁹ For an excellent recent analysis in this context, see Nightingale (1999, 316-25). The most detailed analysis supporting the scientific perspective is in Saunders (1973, 232-44). This position has been recently contested by Stalley (2009, 187-205). I did not find his counter arguments convincing.

⁷⁰ Morrow (1960, 242). In the *Phaedrus* (261a, 271c), which was written *after* the *Republic*, Plato coined the word *psuchagogia*, the art of leading souls, to characterize

Laws of the poets having a deceitful *technē*, as in the *Republic*, Plato does see poetic deceit as a powerful tool in convincing the citizens of Magnesia to conform to the same paradigm. The Athenian notes, after referring to the Phoenician myth of the sowing of the dragon teeth: “the myth shows the legislator that the souls of the young can be persuaded of anything; he only has to try” (*Lg.* 663e).⁷¹ To which he adds: “The legislator must think up every possible device to ensure that the entire community preserves in its songs (*ōidais*), stories (*muthois*) and doctrines (*logois*) an absolute lifelong unanimity” (664a).

What Plato’s Magnesian legislator has in common with the traditional poet is his awareness that legislation must be one vast system of total persuasion. In conjunction, Plato insists that the laws of Magnesia⁷² must be set to music—a music that, like the laws themselves, must *never* be changed—and not only sung but also danced to in chorus with the accompaniment of the lyre (812a-e). And Plato insists on several occasions in the *Laws* that all *mousikē*, including his own, is imitative and representative (e. g. *Lg.* 668a6, b10, 669c, 802c-d, 803a-b, 854b). In other words, the laws must be poetized and set to music and therefore “performed” in a fashion reminiscent of “dramatic poetry.”⁷³

This explains why, in refusing entry to the travelling troupe of foreign tragedians, the Athenian has the citizens of Magnesia say that they themselves are the greatest tragedians (*tragōidai*), the greatest poets (*poiētai*), the greatest performers, and their laws the greatest tragedy (*tragōidian tēn alēthestatēn*, 817b). If our lives must be modeled on the divine, what is a better way to communicate the divine, to imitate the divine, than through God’s own divine plan: through singing and dancing the dramatic poetic tragedy of the *Laws*, the ultimate road to earthly virtue and happiness?⁷⁴

None of this seems to imply the exercise of our free will. In Plato’s *Laws*, there would be no room for any form of atheism to see the light of day. At best, the young man could join the chorus of the heavenly bodies in song and dance (*Ti.* 40c) and await his proper place in the wheel of fortune.

rhetoric which, if it is practised correctly, is now an exceptional art. In the *Laws* (909b2 and 909b3), the Athenian uses the verb *psuchagogēin*—the only occurrences of the verb in a similar sense. Nussbaum (1986, 227) has contended that the *Phaedrus* “may be our first example of philosophical poetry that Plato has in mind.” What seems certain is that poetry takes on a new *conscious* meaning with Plato.

⁷¹ This myth, of course, has a number of analogies with another so-called Phoenician myth, the story of the three metals in the *Republic*. In both examples, the philosopher/legislator relies on honourable deceit to assure the victory of virtue over vice.

⁷² The laws of Magnesia are *written* both to facilitate their memorization and to assure that there is no room for improvisation (772c, 789a-c; see also Naddaf 2000, 342ff.).

⁷³ The mark of a well-educated man, as Plato contends in the *Laws* (644b) “is one that is able to sing and dance well.”

⁷⁴ I develop this in more detail in Naddaf 2000.