Chapter Six

Overturning Soul-Body Dualism
in Plato’s Timaeus

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In Plato’s Phaedo, we hear a story about human life that casts the body—the seat of sensation and all the affections—as an “evil” that contaminates us, infects us, and acts as an obstacle to knowledge.1 The philosopher must treat the sickness of the body by “purifying himself.” He must despise and disassociate from his body as much as possible and allow his best self, his intellectual soul, to pursue truth unhindered. The “healthy” good life, here, is depicted as the one that practices for dying and is, as much as possible, disembodied.2 These broad strokes have been incredibly influential in the way our Western philosophical tradition (1) has defined the human being as soul or mind, as opposed to body; (2) has separated the “rational” human from “unintelligent” nature; and (3) has envisioned ethics as a project to control the body, its sensations, and its desires.3 Feminists have spent considerable effort showing the way in which the hierarchical soul-body dualism is itself gendered and closely associated with the hierarchical masculine-feminine dualism (or gender binary) that systematically operates to denigrate women. Elizabeth Spelman argues, in her essay “Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views,”4 that though we may find occasional attempts by Plato to suggest that women are capable of the same range of talents as men (as in Book V of the Republic), it is in his soul-body dualism
that we find Plato's underlying misogyny. She tells us that the lesson from Plato is: "To have more concern for your body than your soul is to act just like a woman." In matters of wisdom, courage, self-control, love, and the overall "good life," one should not follow the example of women, who remain slaves to their bodies. She points out: "It is true that Plato chastises certain kinds of men: sophists, tyrants, and cowards, for example. But he frequently puts them in their place by comparing them to women!" If individuals do not learn to overcome and control their bodies, they will become womanly and consequently fail in their attempts to achieve full humanity, health, and happiness. With convincing evidence from a wide range of Plato's dialogues, she argues that Plato continually conceives of woman as body and, thus, he associates women with the very thing that he believes drags down and enslaves the best part of the human being. Though I agree with Spelman that Plato regularly presses the hierarchical distinction between soul and body and associates women with body, I aim to show that there are also resources within Plato's own writings for overturning the very soul-body dualism that he spends so much time carving out—resources that should prove helpful for undoing the gender binary. To do this, I will turn in this chapter to Plato's Timaeus, which offers a picture of life—on the large scale of the cosmos, as well as the small scale of the human being—as a psychosomatic whole in which intelligence and sensation are intertwined. I aim to show that the Timaeus provides us with a picture of the good life that is achieved by emphasizing, rather than severing, the deep connections between soul and body, and that the dialogue offers a prescription for living as a harmonious whole. Such a picture and prescription should prove helpful for reenvisioning traditional gender identities or gender traits as intertwined aspects of a whole person, whose cooperation brings about harmony in the human being.

Cosmic Life

Timaeus begins his speech by telling us a "likely story" of the birth of the cosmos. He asserts that the cosmos is the sort of thing that has "come to be," as it is visible, touchable, and has a body. All things that come to be, Timaeus says, must have some cause, which he initially posits as "the craftsman" (démoungos) and later expands on to include two things: intellect (nous), associated with the craftsman, and necessity (arámkē), associated with bodies. The cosmos can only come to be by the "standing-together" (estasis) of necessity and intellect. We soon see that the cosmos itself is a great living animal in which intellect and necessity, and in which soul (psyche) and body (soma), are completely interwoven.

Timaeus tells us that since our cosmos is beautiful, and so our craftsman good, the craftsman must have ordered "the all" by looking to a self-same model grasped by intellect for guidance. For, it is because of intellect and proportion that things are beautiful. He continues that the good craftsman took up all that was visible, but which moved unmusically, and "brought it into order from disorder." The craftsman realized that in order for "the all" to be beautiful it needed intellect. And, because "it's impossible for intellect apart from soul to become present in anything," the craftsman constructed intellect within soul and soul within body and "joined them with one another by bringing them together center to center." Thus, he gave birth to a great visible and intelligent living animal (زون) that was constructed of the four elements—fire, earth, water, and air—combined according to proportion.

We have here a first lesson that soul and body are intimately intertwined in all that lives. They are joined together to produce life. But in our next lesson, we discover that the intertwining goes so deep that our ability to distinguish soul from body, even conceptually, is questionable. When Timaeus tries to break down the construction of the cosmos into steps, and tries to describe the construction of the cosmic body, we learn that soul is already at work, not only in the proportional combination of the four elements, but in the very constitution of those elements. The physical "stuff" that exists before it is brought together with soul is disorderly, without ratio and measure, and is not yet even in the forms of fire, air, earth, and water, or what we might call the forms of the simplest bodies. Before the craftsman gets involved, there are only "traces" of fire, air, water, and earth, but they are not yet fully articulated as such. Timaeus says:

Now on the one hand, before that time [before the all was ordered], all these things were in a condition that was without ratio and measure; and when the attempt was made to array the all, at first fire, and water and earth and air—although they had certain traces of themselves—were yet altogether disposed as is likely for everything to be whenever god is absent from anything; and since this was their nature at the
time, god first of all thoroughly configured them by means of forms and numbers.  

The four elemental bodies are configured geometrically out of triangles by the intellect of the craftsman. That's how the craftsman makes the "traces" orderly and intelligent. Now, we remember "it's impossible for intellect apart from soul to become present in anything." So, it seems that the simplest elemental bodies actually become identifiable bodies (with form and geometric order) by becoming ensouled. Bodies can't even be bodies without soul.

When Timaeus turns to the construction of the cosmic soul, his story further calls into question any hard dualism in which body and soul are totally different kinds of things. Whereas the Socrates of the Phaedo tells us the body is visible, composite, always changes, and can scatter and die, while the soul is invisible, intelligible, one, always the same, and cannot disintegrate; Timaeus tells us, first, that cosmic soul is itself a blend of Being and Becoming (Being, which is self-same and non-partitioned, and Becoming, which changes, is partitioned, and comes to be in the realm of bodies). The cosmic soul includes not just what Timaeus calls the nature of the Same, but also the nature of the Other within it. Soul has, thus, a most fundamental thing in common with body: the nature of the Other is in both. But we learn that soul has even further things in common with body in Timaeus' story. Timaeus tells us, second, that both soul and body "come to be" and are generated (whereas, for Socrates in the Phaedo, only bodies are generated). He tells us, third, that the cosmic soul moves in circuits, which suggests it is spatial like a body. After the craftsman blended together Being and Becoming, Timaeus explains, he cut up his mixture into strips that he formed into two circles, and set them into motion. If cosmic soul is to move around in a circle, it must have some physical properties, even if they are not visible to the human eye, just like bodies. Timaeus proclaims, fourth, that nothing exists outside of the cosmos, which is perfect, complete, and self-sufficient (and which, we remember, is touchable and has a body). Thus, there seems to be no real possibility of disembodied soul in Timaeus' story, as there is for Socrates in the Phaedo, who argues for souls that live on, separate from their bodies, after their bodies die. For Timaeus, any soul that exists must be within the cosmos, and since the cosmos is itself a bodily entity, we can infer that all soul must be embodied. (This casts an interesting doubt on whether even the craftsman exists outside of or separate from, the cosmos he is making.) In the Timaeus, any hard dualism between soul and body is already called into question on the macrocosmic level of "the all." 

Next, Timaeus' story of the way in which the cosmos comes to give a silent account of itself emphasizes not only the importance of intellect but also that of sensation for achieving self-knowledge. Once again, the dualistic thinking of Socrates in the Phaedo, which attempts to hold apart soul and body and emphasize intellection alone as the path to knowledge, is called into question. Timaeus describes the way in which the cosmos, once constructed, begins her life, connects with herself, and informs herself about herself. The cosmos comes into contact with herself by perceiving all the particulars within herself—by touching on and being touched by each thing. Timaeus says the following of the cosmos:

"Whenever she touches on something that has its Being dispersed or, again, something whose Being is non-partitioned, she is moved throughout her whole self and tells what that thing is the same as and what it's other than, and in what exact relation and where and how and when it turns out that particular things are and are affected, both for what comes to be and for what's always in the same condition."  

Timaeus depicts the cosmos as "giving an account" to herself that is quite similar to the description given by Socrates in the Republic (which the listeners supposedly heard the day before) of the activity of the philosopher who has knowledge. The great psychosomatic animal seems to philosophize, even if silently, by giving an account to herself of all her inner pieces. She is able to "give an account" because of both her intellect, which understands that within herself that has the nature of the Same, and because of her ability to touch on and perceive all of the physical aspects of herself, which have the nature of the Other. On the level of the cosmic whole, physical sensation, thus, is presented as an aid to knowledge, not an obstacle. There seems in the Timaeus, thus, to be a rethinking of the value of the body in the process of knowledge and a holding together of intellect and sensation as cooperative partners in this process. The body and its power of sensation is not treated as an inferior element in the universe to be denied or suppressed. It is essential for self-knowledge on a cosmic scale.
Mortal Life

What we hear about the relationship between soul and body and the role of sensation for knowledge on the macrocosmic level of the living whole is imitated on the microcosmic level of the human animal. Timaeus’ story of the way in which the immortal and mortal parts of the soul are woven together with the body in the human being emphasizes their interconnection and their cooperation for maximum functioning.

Timaeus tells us that the immortal part of the soul with its divine circuits was placed in the head, perched on top in a position of rule. The face was placed around the divine part in order to offer “organs for all the forethought of the soul.” This suggests that human beings can only properly be guided by a partnership between soul and physical organs. The mouth, in particular, is a site of cooperation—fulling the soul’s needs for intelligent speech, and the body’s needs for nutrients—as it is formed to be “the entrance for things that are necessary but an exit for things that are best.” The spirited part of the soul was placed in the chest near the physical heart, so that once it “boils up” it affects that organ which sends signals (pumps blood) to the rest of the body, and makes it jump into action. The desiring part of the soul that’s connected with physical needs was placed near the belly, farthest from the rational part, so as not to disturb it. Since this desiring part does not understand reason, but “falls readily under the spell of images and phantasms,” the liver, which reflects intellectual thoughts as if in a mirror, was placed near it either to frighten it and forbid it when appropriate, or to provide divine inspiration that might touch on truth and soothe it when needed. Finally, the gods who designed us knew the sort of gluttony that would be in us because of our desire for food and drink, and they knew that we “would use much more than was temperate and necessary. So in order that quick destruction through diseases might not arise... they put in place the ‘lower belly,’ as it is named, as a receptacle for the holding of superfluous food and drink.”

It is not the case, then, that only the soul regulates the body, as we’ve been told by the Socrates of the Phaedo. Our bodies have been fashioned in such a way as to regulate their own potential for excessiveness. The body is presented here as a partner working in cooperation with the soul for our good, rather than as a disease.

So far, Timaeus has shown us the way in which the human being is akin to the rest of nature, made of the same “stuff,” and woven together as a psychosomatic whole whose parts operate together in friendship. Now, in spite of all of its commonality with the cosmos, the human being—because it is a finite, individuated being—experiences its own condition in a striking and unique way. What is it like to be an individual entity who is not self-sufficient and who is “subject to inflow and outflow” in the midst of a world larger than itself? Timaeus tells us that living as a human being is much like attempting to swim in a rushing river, undergoing all sorts of collisions with other bodies that rattle and disrupt the divine cosmic circuits within us to their very core. Timaeus says of our human experience,

And these circuits, as though bound within a prodigious river, neither mastered it nor were mastered, but were forcibly swept along and also did sweep, so that the whole animal was moved—moved, however, in whatever disorderly way it might happen to progress... as prodigious as was that food-supplying wave that washed over it and then flowed away, still greater was the uproar that the affections of the bodies produced by attacking each of them whenever a body of one of them would collide with fire, having met up with it as something alien from the outside, or also with a solid chunk of earth or with the liquid glidings of waters, or when it would be overtaken by a blast of wind-swept air, and when the motions swept through the body by all these properties would attack the soul—which is also the very reason why all these motions were then called “sensings” and are still called now.

Our human condition, here, is likened to a state of seasickness. The sensations that the human being undergoes severely “shake up” and “attack” the soul, producing an “uproar of affections” that can overwhelm us, disorient us, and cause our souls to “become unintelligent.”

Living as an individuated, sensing being, no doubt, comes with some big challenges, a story that sounds familiar to us from the Phaedo. However, Timaeus believes that the answer for how to deal with the uproar of sensation and affection is not to ignore or despise our bodies. The way to deal with the onslaught of sensation and affection is to learn how to use them to reorient ourselves and find stability. Timaeus tells us how we can enlist the help of sensation to get us back in touch with the cosmic circuits that course in our souls and throughout “the
all." It is especially with sight—by raising our gaze to the motions of the heavenly bodies in the sky—that we remember the stable order within us. He says that god gave us vision so that we might observe the circuits of intellect in heaven and imitate them to stabilize the orbits of thinking within ourselves. Timaeus declares,

[Let it be said that this is the cause and these the reasons for which god discovered vision and gave it to us as a gift: in order that, by observing the circuits of intellect in heaven, we might use them for the orbits of the thinking within us, which are akin to those, the disturbed to the undisturbed; and, by having thoroughly learned them and partaken of the natural correctness in their calculations, thus imitating the utterly unwandering circuits of the god, we might stabilize the wander-stricken circuits in ourselves.]

Timaeus tells us that it is, in fact, because of our sensation of the movement of the heavenly bodies and our recognition of night and day and their return that we are able to count, grasp anything on a mathematical level, inquire into cosmic order, and develop a philosophical account of it. Timaeus emphasizes that we need not only sight but hearing as well in order to maintain healthy order within ourselves. Hearing is needed to access both speech and music, according to which we might attune our souls. Sensation is not something, then, we should attempt to ignore. It is not simply a disrupter. It is essential for bringing back order and balance to our mortal lives. If we direct it in the right way, it can help us cope with and overcome the "seasickness" we feel when we're overwhelmed by external stimuli. Furthermore, we need it to pursue our highest philosophic activities as human beings. Unlike other Platonic texts, the Timaeus does not prescribe that we divide ourselves against ourselves to remedy our problems. It doesn't portray one part of ourselves (the body, or the power of sensation) as a simple problem-causer that needs to somehow be disarmed, silenced, or cut out. In an antidualist move, it repeatedly treats both soul and body as essential for maximum functioning, and it emphasizes the importance of their intertwined cooperation for the highest states of health.

Now that we've seen the broad theme at work in the Timaeus of what sorts of sicknesses humans suffer and how we are to remedy them, let's look at the more focused story Timaeus tells of our peculiar human diseases near the end of his speech, and what sort of prescription he offers for "the treatment of our bodies and thought-processes." Timaeus reminds us that if an animal is to be good, it is to be beautiful, which means it must have proportion, most importantly between soul and body. The cause of the greatest human diseases, he tells us, is an imbalance between body and soul. The first case of such an imbalance is when the soul is stronger than its body. In such a situation, when the soul becomes enraged, strenuously studies, or vigorously debates, it "shakes it [the body] all up from the inside and fills it with diseases." The second case is when a body is stronger than its soul. When the body's desire for food outweighs or overwhelms the soul's desire for prudence, the body becomes too big and the soul becomes "dull, slow to learn and forgetful, thereby producing the greatest of diseases—stupidity." So what is the remedy for these sicknesses in the human being that arise from a lack of harmony between body and soul? Timaeus shows us, once again, that the solution is not to ignore or disengage from the body and to care only for the soul (as we might have heard in the Phaedo). It is to cultivate both soul and body so that the animal is strong, proportional, and balanced as a whole. Timaeus says: "The one safeguard from both these conditions is this: never to set the soul in motion without body nor body without soul, so that both of them, by defending themselves, may become equally balanced and thereby healthy." Mathematicians must be sure to also cultivate their bodies by attending to gymnastics, and athletes must apply themselves "to the liberal arts and all philosophy" if they are to become healthy, beautiful, and good. It is by keeping both our bodies and souls in motion so that they do not become idle, weak, or totally mastered by outside forces, and by attending to them by nourishing and exercising them in the ways appropriate for each, that we treat sicknesses of disproportion. It is by keeping our bodies and souls in motion together that we also maintain and strengthen their unity as an integrated whole.

By now we have seen that the integrated cooperation of balanced parts is central to the health of a living organism in the story of the Timaeus, and that creating or maintaining health (whether on a macro or microcosmic scale) is in large part about bringing about a state of balanced wholeness. Just like the good, creative activity of the craftsman, the good, creative activity of a human being involves blending, mixing, balancing, making beautiful proportion, making harmonious friendships between parts, and making whole. Unlike some other Platonic texts,
the thrust of the Timaeus is far more holist than dualist. It stresses integration and intermixing, not division and opposition, in both its way of understanding living systems and its recommendations for remedying sickness and bringing about health in our own lives. If the soul and body represent masculine and feminine sides of life in Plato’s works, as many feminists have argued, then the lesson of the Timaeus is that we must mix and balance these masculine and feminine sides of life within ourselves in order to bring about our healthiest and most beautiful state of harmonious wholeness. The lesson is not to exercise the feminine. The Timaeus, thus, is one of those resources within Plato’s corpus that overturns the hierarchical soul-body dualism and associated gender binary that ground other Platonic dialogues.

**Chôra: The Excluded Feminine?**

But what if the Timaeus is a strange tale in which soul and body do not represent masculine and feminine sides of life at all, as in other Platonic texts. What if it is a tale in which soul and body both represent the masculine, while the feminine is relegated to someplace that is beyond both soul and body? What if the thing feminized in the Timaeus is not the body at all but, rather, a far more ambiguous, difficult to identify, “something” that precedes the birth of all bodies: the “place” or formless “space” where bodies are born? What might this mean for femininity? Is the feminine excluded in the Timaeus from active participation in the generation of the cosmos, and from the cosmos itself?

In his third “new beginning” of his cosmology, Timaeus suggests that his prior stories of the most basic metaphysical “kinds” were too simple. There are not just two metaphysical kinds, but three: “that which comes to be, that in which it comes to be, and that from which what comes to be sprouts as something copied.” That from which things come to be is the intelligible, invisible, unsensed, and stable model. It is the eternal forms. It is Being. That which comes to be is the visible, sensed, unstable imitation or copy of the form. It is born, grows, decays, and dies. It is the manifold and ever-changing world of “informed” bodies. It is Becoming. But there is a third kind—that in which things come to be—which he had forgotten.

Timaeus struggles to name this “in which,” this “third kind,” for it lacks any shape or form that would make it identifiable, distinguishable, and nameable. It is invisible and indestructible, like Being, but it shape-shifts along with whatever forms enter it, “appearing different at different times,” and it is ever-changing like Becoming. Lacking form, it is unbalanced, disorderly, and unmusical. Timaeus calls it “difficult and obscure.” We cannot grasp it with knowledge or opinion. We can only approach it with a dreamlike “bastard reasoning.” It seems to be beyond logos, and yet Timaeus has quite a lot to say about it.

He first tries to name the third kind by calling it a “receptacle” (hypodochê), a receiving place offering enclosure and hospitality. Later he expands on this by calling it a place or “space” (chôra), “providing a seat for all that has birth . . . for it is necessary somehow for everything that is to be in some region and occupy some space.” It is the space where all of Becoming is born. And finally, he calls it a “molding stuff” (ekmageion) that temporarily takes on the various shapes it receives, but never has any stable shape of its own, and is itself totally neutral, receptive, and malleable. Timaeus explains that in order for it to take on the imprints of other shapes well, it must itself be shapeless and pure. He declares the following:

If the imprints are going to be sufficiently various with every variety to be seen, then that in which the imprints are fixed wouldn’t be prepared well unless it’s shapeless with respect to all those looks that it might be going to receive from elsewhere. For if it should be similar to any of the things that come on the scene, on receiving what was contrary to itself or of an altogether different nature, whenever these things arrive, it would copy them badly by projecting its own visage alongside the thing copied. And that’s why that which is to take up all kinds within itself would be outside of all forms.

What is remarkable about this story is the way in which the three metaphysical “kinds” are decisively gendered by Timaeus. Being is the father. Space/receptacle/molding stuff (which, remember, is supposed to be completely neutral and without shape) is the mother and wet-nurse of becoming. And Becoming is the offspring and (presumably male) imitation of the father’s form. In their most basic manifestations, the masculine is associated with eternal forms; the feminine is associated with ambiguous and unnameable space (or perhaps matter; as Aristotle took it); and the product/child is an embodied imitation of the father’s form.
What does all of this mean for the role of femininity in the universe? The insinuation might be, first, that the feminine lacks any identity of her own, because she lacks form (either as original or as imitation). She is unidentifiable and unintelligible. She is no-thing. Second, it might mean that the feminine element of reality is just "there," but doesn't do anything. She is completely passive. She plays no contributing role in the masculine self-reproduction of all things in the cosmos—in which fathers beget sons, in which models beget copies, in which forms beget bodies—beyond providing a place where the masculine drama can play out. Even if a child begotten is, so to speak, a "girl," she would, strictly speaking, still be a masculine entity, in so far as she participates in any form, and therefore shares a likeness to the father. An embodied, living feminine creature is erased from the story. Femininity is cast out and lives somewhere in exile—beyond Being and Becoming, soul and body, original and imitation—for femininity is beyond (or more properly before) all forms, all distinctions, and all language. The feminine is, thus, excluded from any active role in all that lives. Some contemporary feminists read just this message in the Timaeus and declare that the feminine is denied all agency in Plato.

Luce Irigaray, in her essay Plato's Hystera, highlights Plato's relegation of the feminine to "the beyond" of all that is intelligible and his exclusion of her from active participation in generative processes. She shows how the feminine in Plato's metaphysics is actually not portrayed as the inferior and problematic participating member of the pairs man/woman, soul/body, and form/matter, as earlier feminists might have thought. Rather, the feminine is exiled to some nonparticipatory "space" that is beyond all binaries.

In her essay, Irigaray takes up the status of the space/receptacle/molding stuff of the Timaeus in the context of Plato's cave. She sees the cave—in the famous, central metaphor of Plato's Republic—to be a womb (hystera) (which she also refers to as mother, receptacle, mold, and matter) in which the eternal forms are physically manifested. The cave/womb, in Irigaray's reading, is a reproductive space in which reflections, copies, or shadows of originals are born. She explains that the cave must be pure and "virgin," without any character or activity of its own, in order to reflect originals clearly and not contaminate the "likenesses" of the forms that dance around inside her.

Irigaray sees the cave/womb as a matrix in which all representation occurs and in which all distinctions are produced, like the distinctions between light and dark, intelligible and sensible, original and imitation, father and child, truth and fantasy, good and evil, the one and many, and life and death. But, she argues, this matrix itself is never represented in Plato's metaphysical stories, never identified, and never even noticed. It disappears, like a mirror behind all of the images that dance on its surface. It is "that unrepresentable origin of all forms and all morphology."46

The cave/womb, as Irigaray sees it, is the feminine ground (or, even better, the virgin soil) of a masculine system of reality crafted by Plato. The feminine ground makes possible everything that matters in an economy that only counts original forms (the father) and their likenesses (his offspring), but it is a ground that is itself excluded and placed "outside" of that economy. For Irigaray, femininity is relegated by Plato to an "indefinite beyond." It is a "remainder," a "surplus," an "excess" that cannot be accounted for within the patriarchal economy of Being and Becoming. From Irigaray's perspective, it is a not just forgotten but "willfully unnoticed."46 This is because it is a threat to the father's power. The mother must be erased in order for the father to claim his reign as the singular source of all that is. It is the "[eclipse of the mother, of the place (of) becoming, whose non-representation or even disavowal upholds the absolute being attributed to the father."47

As Judith Butler puts it, the feminine for Irigaray is an "inscriptional site" and "anthemmatizable materiality" within a phallocentric economy, and it must be excluded for the posturing of an all-masculine reproductive system in the universe to maintain internal coherence. Butler declares of Irigaray's work: "Her reading establishes the cosmology of the Forms in the Timaeus as a phallic phantasm of a fully self-constituted patriarchy, and this fantasy of autogenesis or self-constitution is effected through a denial and cooptation of the female capacity for reproduction."48 Irigaray shows that what is excluded from the Platonic "phallic phantasm" is already inside it and "calls into question its systematic closure and its pretension to be self-grounding."49 In other words, Irigaray shows that the Platonic patrilineal system is completely dependent on the feminine, which it needs as its support, even as it desperately tries to exclude it.

Now, Butler's own concern is that Irigaray's identification of "the excluded" with "the feminine" in Plato's work misses the fact that (a) other things are excluded from Plato's economy beside women, like slaves and animals, and (b) the excluded woman is a particular kind of woman—a heterosexual mother-woman—which means all other kinds of women are excluded from the exclusion (doubly excluded). So, there
is a worry that there are not only types of misogyny at work in Plato's metaphysics, but also types of racism, deep anthropocentrism, and heterosexism that need to be addressed, which Irigaray misses. But both Irigaray and Butler, in their reading of the space/receptacle/molding stuff of the *Timaeus*, focus on the inscription that femininity is something unintelligible and passive. They emphasize what we might call *Timaeus' rules* about the feminine in the guise of *chōra*. The formless, shapeless feminine cannot be identified, comprehended, or even named. The feminine must never resemble the father's original form, nor the child's imitative form. She is different from them both, but has no designation of her own. The feminine is totally receptive. She can be penetrated, but can never penetrate. She can be affected, but can never affect. She can never contribute something of her own to the offspring. Let's pause here and ask: Is this really what the *Timaeus* has made of femininity? A noncontributing, passive, no-thing? Does the *Timaeus* really cast the mother of Becoming as totally lacking in agency? Is there another story we could tell?

Retrieving Feminine Movement

I'm not sure that Irigaray's and Butler's emphasis on *Timaeus' rules* about *chōra* reveals a complete picture of the third metaphysical kind, or the "cosmic feminine" that she represents. *Timaeus* account of *chōra* includes not just a set of rules about her, but fascinating descriptions that directly contradict those rules. What I find missing from Irigaray's and Butler's analysis is one of the most interesting parts of *Timaeus' story about *chōra*- her movement.

*Timaeus* might suggest at first that *chōra* is a rather characterless and neutral "space." But then he goes on to describe her in rather dynamic terms. She moves and shakes in unique ways. *Timaeus* says that when different shapes enter the mother's space,

she herself is shaken by those kinds [traces of earth, water, air, fire] and, being moved, in turn shakes them back; and the kinds, in being moved, are always swept along this way and that and are dispersed—just like the particles shaken and winnowed out by sieves and other instruments used for purifying grain: the dense and heavy are swept to one site and

settle, the porous and light to another. So too, when the four kinds are shaken by the recipient, who, being herself moved, is like an instrument that produces shaking, she separates farthest from each other the kinds that are most dissimilar, while pushing together as close as possible those that are most similar—which is exactly why these different kinds also held a different place even before the all was arrayed and came to be out of them.

Granted, *chōra* "is shaken," and so there is a passive side to her movement. But she is not a strictly passive entity. She actively shakes back, and her shaking back has an interesting function. It organizes the "four kinds" that enter her by putting like with like. The new state she generates, as particles leave her space, is one of little communities or coagulations of like with like, each in their own place and distinguished from each other. Her activity of organizing kinds offers the craftsman some already distinguished content that he can further order with ratio and number. She, thus, plays an active and productive role in the creation of Becoming even before the father gets involved.

Her passive-active shaking movement not only introduces a kind of organizing activity into the universe, different from the father's, it also introduces the specific kind of movement experienced by a mortal animal—a simultaneously sensitive and responsive movement of interrelation with what is other than oneself. *Timaeus* tells us that *chōra* is moved by "being liquefied and ignited and receiving the shapes of earth and air, and suffering all the other affections that follow along with these." But, as we saw, she also moves back, and affects these shapes as they exit her. She is in an interactive relationship with what is other than herself. She is acted on and acts back. She receives and she responds. She is transformed and she transforms. And, because of this double-movement, this ambiguously passive-active way of being, "she sways irregularly in every direction." Similarly, the mortal animal experiences "an uproar of the affections" whenever it "would collide with fire . . . with a solid chunk of earth, or with the liquid glidings of waters, or when it would be overtaken by a blast of wind-swept air." The mortal animal, like *chōra*, is moved and affected, but also moves and affects. *Timaeus* tells us that due to the inflow and outflow of the elements, the mortal animal's circuits "were forcibly swept along and also did sweep" and in the process "the whole animal was moved . . . in
whatever disorderly way it might happen to progress ... forwards and backwards, and again to the right and to the left, both down and up, wandering every which way down all six regions. This ambiguous, passive-active, disorderly movement, which seems to mimic chōra's, is a movement that is essential for individuated creatures to make contact with their world. It is the movement in which the double experience of sensation—of simultaneously touching and being touched—occurs. It is an essential movement for a being that is not self-sufficient, but that must interact with other beings in interdependent systems of perpetual change to live. In other words, it is essential to the mode of being that is Becoming; and it is the "mother" of Becoming that contributes it to the universe.

In the Timaeus, as Sara Brill notes, "the way something moves is treated as essential to what it is." Perhaps the "mother of Becoming" is not a neutral, character-less "no-thing" after all. Perhaps her ambiguous double-movement is the key to what she is. Perhaps, granted, she is still so variable and fluid that she is beyond all binaries in her passive-active way of being (still an interesting idea worth pursuing, and yet another possible site of resistance against the gender binary from within Plato). But she's not lacking in agency, and she's not lacking in a contributing role in the genesis of the cosmos, as Irigaray and Butler interpreted her to be. Perhaps the mother's movement, as Timaeus continually emphasizes, is unbalanced, unmusical, disorderly, and wandering. Perhaps, as Emanuela Bianchi poetically puts it, this movement of the mother marks "the feminine as errant, striking cacophonous, arrhythmic notes in an assuredly masculine harmony as immeasurable disorderly motion." But as we've seen (and as Bianchi also argues) this arrhythmic movement has a positive and productive force. It's indeterminate and wandering character offers the freedom necessary for creative contact with what is other than oneself. Such a contact involves spontaneity and the chance of unanticipated results. Such a contact is significant for both parties, in that it involves mutual transformation. And such a contact produces new connections and communities between beings. This free movement—perhaps a sort of playing or dancing like no one is watching—is essential to the life of Becoming, and it is a movement that cannot be found in "the father." The father, to be sure, also contributes a kind of motion in which mortal beings participate—the circular motion of the so-called circuits of the soul, and the blending and balancing movements we spent so much time on in the first half of this chapter. But the father's movements alone are not sufficient for mortal life. Again, we see in the story of the Timaeus that a healthy whole—in this case the whole of a mortal creature that must live in interactive relationships with other beings—involves a combination and cooperation of masculine and feminine elements.

When we focus on Timaeus' descriptions of the different movements that the masculine and feminine metaphysical kinds introduce into the universe, we see that they are not opposed to each other, or related to each other as master/slave, superior/inferior, or active/passive. Both actively contribute necessary elements to the dynamics of their offspring's life. Timaeus may try to deny chōra or "the feminine" agency when he calls her "all-receptive," but he fails in the face of his own descriptions of her movement. Once again, we find in the Timaeus a story in which the feminine (whether cast as body, or sensation, or chōra) is crucial for the functioning of the whole. The feminine, in her different possible guises, is not ignored or suppressed, but balanced in collaboration with the masculine. The hierarchical, dualistic systems of soul/body, intellect/sensation, active/passive, master/slave, human/nature, being/space, form/matter—and their associated gender binary of masculine/feminine—just do not hold up in the bulk of the Timaeus. They are repeatedly overturned in favor of holistic systems.

A Final Tale about Women

And yet, one cannot ignore a familiar tale that pops up twice in the dialogue. If you don't do a good job living the ideal human life, you will become unjust and "womanly." If you fail to live well, you will be reborn a woman. Fail again, and you will become a beast. But something is different this time when we hear the old tale in which women and nonhuman animals are demoted in the hierarchy of living beings. It is not rooted in its usual set of analogies, associations, or "reasons" that support it. One can't say this time, without massive contradiction with the rest of the dialogue, that living badly (and so "like a woman") means that you can't figure out how to silence your body and make it the soul's slave. One can't say this time that living badly means that you let sensation have its way and can't figure out how to deny and ignore it. Such claims do not fit with the rest of the dialogue in which, as we've shown, the healthy/good life is not a matter of the soul's suppression of
the body, nor a matter of a masculine life principle ruling over a feminine life principle. It is, rather, about their cooperation and creation of an integrated whole. So, what is going on here? Why the slip back into the traditional denigration of women, as those who are unable to play the master, at the end of an account in which creating master-slave relationships is not the goal, and human health is characterized in terms of balance and perhaps even an androgynous ideal? I admit that this is incredibly frustrating. I think that it reminds us that misogyny runs much deeper than theoretical associations or systems of binary thinking. Feminists will meet a limit to what they can do to resist misogyny if they restrict themselves to the analysis and critique of theory. The theoretical associations and dualistic systems of thinking that usually prop up the gender binary and the demotion of women are, more often than not, replaced with holistic frameworks in the Timaeus. And yet misogyny is still present. What can we surmise from this? I can’t help but conclude that philosophical thinking always remains situated in cultural biases, even when it attempts to do something radical and break free of them. Reason is surrounded by unreason, as if by bookends. We will have to find ways to affect the bookends.

Conclusion

In the Timaeus we find a story about human life that disrupts the strict dualism of the Phaedo, which has been handed down to us as representative of the Platonic theory that systematically divides soul and body, and privileges what is “one and the same” and intellectual over what is changing and physical. We’ve seen that in some parts of the Timaeus, the soul-body dualism is so fundamentally disrupted that the conceptual distinction cannot be maintained. In other places, where the conceptual distinction is still upheld, the relationship between the two aspects of life is portrayed as a close-knit partnership. In the Timaeus we find a story that does not prescribe a divorce from our bodies in order to overcome our human ills, but encourages us to integrate and harmonize soul and body so that they establish a balanced friendship. If body represents the feminine in the Timaeus, as in other dialogues, then the message is not to suppress or ignore the feminine, but to strengthen it and partner it with the masculine to create a healthy whole.

In the part of the Timaeus where a new formulation of a gendered dualism might potentially open up—between (on the one hand) masculine Being and Becoming, and (on the other) feminine chôra—we find disruption at work again. Though Timaeus may make some attempts to cast chôra/the feminine as the passive, inessential element in the family drama of the cosmos, the project fails as soon as he starts to describe her active and creative movement. Both masculinized and feminized metaphysical elements, as we saw, turn out to be essential participants in the creation of Becoming as a whole. Dualism is overturned in favor of holism again.

The Timaeus offers a useful remedy for overly dualistic philosophical thinking and overly dualistic ways of living. It can aid feminists in the project of overcoming the gender binary by helping them to reconceive masculine and feminine as interactive elements that exist and operate together within a given organism. Such masculine and feminine elements relate to each other, not as opponents, but as cooperative partners to create a balanced whole. From this perspective, the “project of life” might be conceived, not in terms of developing only one side of the gender binary within ourselves, and then finding our place as master or slave in society and the larger natural ecosystem. Instead, it might be conceived in terms of developing both the masculine and feminine elements within ourselves, combining them in inwardly cooperative relationships, and then developing outwardly cooperative relationships with other creatures (human and nonhuman), with whom we share our world. In this way we might find our proper place as microcosm within the larger cosmic order of interdependent systems.

Notes

1. Phd. 66b, 67a.
2. Socrates famously says in the Phaedo: “[T]he one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death” (64a)—that time when we might finally be relieved of all the problems brought on by our attachments to the body and the physical world, and we might finally attain the wisdom and happiness we have been seeking. Friedrich Nietzsche reads Socrates' attitude toward death to be one that is antilife and connected to the notion that physical life is itself a sickness (for which death is the only cure). This is an attitude, according to Nietzsche, that is a symptom of Socrates' own
decay. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Problem of Socrates," in Twilight of the Idols, trans. Richard Polt (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 12-17. Pierre Hadot, on the other hand, sees Socrates' attitude toward death to be part of a spiritual practice—learning to die—in which individuals mature. Living in such a way that one is learning to die involves rising beyond one's partial and individual point of view to a more universal, objective point of view. Pierre Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 93-101. So, for Hadot, the practice is not one of decline but cultivation in which we learn to see and connect ourselves to the whole of humanity and nature. As attractive as Hadot's reading is, the body is still cast as a problem (in this case, the problem of our individualization and partial perspective) that needs to be overcome as much as possible.

3. For interpretive work that disrupts this traditional interpretation of the Phaedo, see the chapter by Hilary Yancey and Anne-Marie Schultz in this volume. They develop ways in which the dualistic reading of the Phaedo, so influential for the history of Western metaphysics and ethics, might be overturned with resources from within the Phaedo itself.


6. Spelman, 118.

7. Timaeus suggests at the outset that different subject matters allow for different types of speech that are appropriate to them. While speech about unchanging Being can be expected to be a precise, logical, and therefore philosophical account (logos); speech about changing Becoming, which is itself just a likeness of Being, can only be expected to be a "likely story" (mythos), associated with opinion (Plato, Tim. 29b-d). Interestingly, Socrates signals that the speech Timaeus is about to give is of a third kind: Socrates calls it "nomos," which is translated as song. This seems to be a kind of foreshadowing for the metaphysical "third kind" that will be introduced later as chôra, which is neither Becoming nor Becoming and which may need its own kind of speech appropriate to it—one that is beyond (and before) logos or mythos. So, not only will the Timaeus be working beyond metaphysical binaries, it will be working beyond binaries of speech as well.

8. Tim. 48a.

9. Already in Timaeus' story, sensation has a key role. It is because we sense that "the cosmos is the most beautiful of things born" (Plato, Tim. 29a) that we are led to understand that our craftsman was good, and that the model used was most perfect, stable, unchanging, and complete. Sensation, thus, leads to philosophical thinking, rather than hindering it (as the Socrates of the Phaedo suggests).

10. Tim. 30a.

11. Tim. 30b, 36e.

12. To learn how Timaeus' discussion of creation as a fertile and productive mixing of the four elements with soul is rooted in a line of Presocratic thinkers (Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras), see the chapter in this volume by Hilary Yancey and Anne-Marie Schultz. Dive further into Anaxagoras' way of understanding separation within a mixture, or immanent difference, in Holly Moore's chapter in this volume.

13. Tim. 53ab.


15. The craftsman constructed the cosmic soul out of a process of blending. First, he took Being (which is self-same and nonpartitioned) and Becoming (which changes, is partitioned, and applies to bodies), and blended them together to make a third form of being. He then takes these three things—(1) Being (which has the nature of the Same), (2) Becoming (which has the nature of the Other), and his (3) intermediate blended third type of being—and blends all three together, having to force the Same and Other together, since the One is the one to mix" (Plato, Timaeus, 35).

16. Timaeus says that after the blending of the cosmic soul, he then cut up his mixture into portions (according to a Pythagorean scale) and split the whole structure down its length into two strips, crossed the two strips like an X, and bent each of them into a circle. The outer circle he designated to move in the course of the Same (which is the course on which the so-called fixed stars that we perceive will lie), and the inner circle he designated to move in the course of the Other (which is the course on which the sun and planets we perceive will move).

17. See Gabriela Roxana Carone, "Mind and Body in Late Plato," Archivier Geschichte der Philosophie 87, no. 3 (2005): 235-46 on this point. She argues that in Timaeus' story, body necessitates soul and intelligent organization, and that soul necessitates body and space.

18. Tim. 37b.

19. The philosopher, the one who has knowledge, is portrayed in the Republic as having the ability to give an account of what a thing is and how it is different from what it is not. The philosopher also knows the difference between that which always is, and that which changes, can grasp both kinds of things for what they are, and can explain the relationship between the changing thing and the stable Form in which it participates. See Plato, The Republic of Plato, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 476d.

20. Tim. 45b.

21. Tim. 75c.

22. Tim. 71b.

23. Divination, which has such an important role in the Phaedrus for the philosopher (who is overcome by divine inspiration in love and led by it toward
wisdom) is able to take place because of a partnership between one of our body parts, which reflects images, and thought, which interprets their meaning.

24. Tim. 72c.
25. Tim. 43a.
26. Tim. 43b–c.
27. Tim. 43c, 44b.
28. Tim. 47b.

29. There’s an interesting commonality between the shaking/sweeping movement of sensation, and the shaking/sweeping movement of what Timaeus will call the “receptacle of becoming,” or “Space” (chôra), which we’ll be getting to below. I’m saying here that the movement of sensation is not simply a disruptive force that jumbles up or disorients. It is also a force that can create order and balance. Later I will suggest that the movement of sensation imitates the movement of chôra. Although chôra is shaken when outside shapes enter her, she also shakes back, and in the process she produces the first moments of order and organization in the cosmos.

30. This is experientially true of actual motion sickness. When one feels swept around by external stimuli in a car or boat, the remedy for the nausea is directing one’s eyes to a faraway stable spot, like the horizon, to reorient and rebalance.

31. Tim. 87c.
32. Tim. 88d.
33. Tim. 88a.
34. Tim. 88b.

35. Tim. 88b. Note that Timaeus suggests that to keep our bodies in motion we should imitate the motion of what he calls the “receptacle of becoming,” or “Space” (chôra). Timaeus tells us that chôra is shaken as the elements enter her and she receives their shapes, but that she also shakes back, and in the process begins to organize physical particles (52e). If we imitate this motion, if we “shake back” we will guard against battles being fought within us between foes, and “produce health” (88e). We’ll come back to the connection between chôra’s movement and mortal animals below.

36. Tim. 88c. We can’t help but hear echoes of Socrates’ holistic educational program in the Republic of music, gymnastics, and philosophy, which Timaeus presumably heard the day before.

37. Tim. 50c.
38. Tim. 50c.
39. Tim. 49a.
40. Tim. 52b.

41. In his essay Khôra, Jacques Derrida initiates thinking about what kind of speech is appropriate for the metaphysical third kind. As chôra is neither

Being nor Becoming, he calls into question whether the appropriate speech can be either logos or mythos, and suggests that it must somehow be beyond them both, defying all binaries. The appropriate speech for chôra is some third genre that, like chôra, situates binaries, or offers the place in which binaries are born, without itself being subject to the law of binaries. But what kind of speech is it? He notes that the “dream-like” reasoning needed to speak chôra “could just as well deprive it [that speech] of lucidity as confer upon it a power of divination” (Jacques Derrida, “Khôra,” in On the Name, trans. David Wood (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 90. Could it be that the speech appropriate to khôra is divinely inspired? More like that obscure speech of an oracle than that of a madman? And could that oracular speech be the kind that situates and gives place and distinction to logos and mythos?

42. Tim. 52b.
43. Tim. 50d–e.

44. An interesting study could be done comparing the metaphysical “third kind” in Plato’s Timaeus with another feminine figure in ancient Greece—the oracle. Sasha Biro, in her chapter in this volume, develops the way in which the oracle is depicted as a kind of virginal vessel, without status or character of her own, possessed by the god who impregnates her with his divine truth, which she births in a kind of speech that is indeterminate, cryptic, and lends itself to multiple meanings. She and her utterances cannot fit into the usual rational order. Yet they are authoritative and communicate ambiguous and paradoxical truths, which the usual rational order, bound to binary thinking, cannot. There seems to be a strong parallel between the way in which chôra is inundated with forms that shake her until she produces an initial kind of indeterminate order that gets further organized in a variety of ways later on, and the way the oracle is inundated with divine knowledge from the god Apollo, which shakes her until she produces a prophetic kind of riddle that will further be interpreted in a variety of ways. As Biro tries to revive the importance of the oracular speech as expressing a significant mode of reasoning and truth beyond the logos/mythos binary that would exile it to the sphere of madness, I try to revive the importance of chôra’s unusual movement as a significant and unique contribution to the birth of the cosmos beyond the active/passive and intelligible/unintelligible binaries that would deny her all agency and distinction.

46. Irigaray, “Plato’s Hystera,” 301.
49. Butler, Bodies that Matter, 43.
50. Butler, Bodies that Matter, 45.
52. Tim. 52e.
53. Tim. 52d.
54. Tim. 52e.
55. Tim. 43c.
56. Tim. 43b.
60. Tim. 42c, 90e.
61. Gregory Vlastos tried to reconcile Plato’s derogatory remarks about women with his feminist political program in the Republic in his article, “Was Plato a Feminist?” He argues that when Plato disparages women by saying they can’t control the impulses of their bodies, lower appetites, or emotions, he is making an observation about the way the common women of Athenian society behaved in his time, not a comment about women’s nature, capacity, or what they could become if the best among them were to get proper education in an ideal city. Vlastos thinks if we distinguish Plato’s not-so-flattering descriptions of women’s cultural situation from his political ideal in which he grants the best women equal education and ruling privileges alongside the best men, then we will see that Plato’s derogatory remarks about women are not inconsistent with (and don’t take away from) his feminist political program in the Republic. Vlastos even says it is a “triumph of imaginative impartiality” that Plato could separate his everyday feelings about women in his own society from his theory of social justice. Gregory Vlastos, “Was Plato a Feminist?,” in Feminist Interpretations of Plato, ed. Nancy Tuana (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 1994), 23. Elizabeth Spelman, in her “Hairy Cobbler and Philosopher-Queens” gives the brilliant comeback: “Misogyny has always been compatible with having high regard for “exceptional” (and surely for imaginary) women,” suggesting that Plato’s praiseworthy comments about a few exceptional (or imaginary) women is not enough to make him a feminist. Elizabeth Spelman, “Hairy Cobbler and Philosopher-Queens,” in Feminist Interpretations of Plato, ed. Nancy Tuana (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 1994), 99. Spelman calls into question whether any feminism can really be found in a political philosophy that treats the majority of women, even the majority of women in his ideal city (in the lower craftsman class), as inferior and fit to be ruled.

Bibliography

Plato composed not one but two separate attempts to solve the conundrum of the woman question: that is, what to do about the role of women in civil society? The most famous, of course, is Socrates’ attempt in the Republic, where he anoints the women of the ruling class as philosopher-queens, albeit as weaker in some respects than the men. But while Socrates does his best to avoid discussing the woman question at all, his counterpart, the Athenian Stranger of the Laws, is forthright about the pressing nature of the problem: The customary practice of leaving women unarranged (ἀνοικτοφθαλμός) by law, without public standing and so with no public stake in public well-being, is a serious case of neglect.¹ The Stranger's own solution is relatively moderate, though often ignored by Republic commentators; he proposes a partial share in the rulership for women, and some shared education.² But while Socrates’ solution to the woman question pleases hardly any reader ever, it remains the more vivid and even appealing of the two, perhaps equally in its scope and limitations; and so it tends to be thought of as Plato's answer simply. But the majority of attempts to understand what Socrates in particular is saying about the woman question lift his words out of the fabric of the Republic's conversational back-and-forth, reducing a highly tense moment to an unsatisfying formula of “what Plato said” in general. In