MORAL VIRTUE AND ASSIMILATION TO GOD IN PLATO'S *TIMAEUS*

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Ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν, 'becoming like god so far as possible', came in antiquity to be universally acknowledged as the Platonic goal in life. In modern studies, *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ* is rarely even to be found in the index.

So begins David Sedley's 'The Ideal of Godlikeness',[1] an article that is a significant step towards remedying the modern neglect of this important Platonic theme. None the less, I shall dispute one of Sedley's central claims: the *Timaeus* suggests that Plato's *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ* ideal 'leaves moral virtue behind and focuses instead on purely intellectual development' (CB, 335~Fine, 324). I hope both to demonstrate that Sedley's arguments are flawed and to show how and why this ideal in the *Timaeus* includes moral virtue as an essential component.

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

> If someone has committed himself entirely to learning and true wisdom, and it is these among the things at his disposal that he has most practised,

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I include the translations that Sedley provides. Other translations are taken from J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, 1997), and J. Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (2 vols.; Princeton, 1984).

[1] This article first appeared as '"Becoming like God" in the *Timaeus* and Aristotle', in T. Calvo and L. Brisson (eds.), *Interpreting the* Timaeus-Critias*: Proceedings of the IV Symposium Platonicum* (Sankt Augustin, 1997), 327–39; an expanded version appeared as 'The Ideal of Godlikeness', in G. Fine (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Philosophy: Plato* (2 vols.; Oxford, 1999), 309–28. References to 'CB' and 'Fine' are to these two versions.

he must necessarily have immortal and divine wisdom, provided that he gets a grasp on truth. And so far as possible for human nature to have a share in immortality, he will not in any degree lack this. And because he always takes care of that which is divine, and has the *daimon* that lives with him well ordered (εὖ κεκοσμημένον), he will be supremely happy (εὐδαίμονα). (CB, 332~Fine, 320; *Tim.* 90 B–C)

Here is how one pursues 'learning and true wisdom':

We should correct the corrupted revolutions in our head concerned with becoming, by learning the harmonies and revolutions of the whole world, and so make the thinking subject resemble the object of its thought, in accordance with its ancient nature; and, by creating this resemblance, bring to fulfilment (τέλος) the best life offered by the gods to mankind for present and future times. (CB, 332~Fine, 320; *Tim.* 90 D; cf. 47 B–C)

Sedley notes that the ancients split into two opposing camps on the question of whether moral virtue is an aspect of the ideal human state: Xenocrates and his followers answered in the affirmative; Plotinus (and much earlier, Aristotle)[2] answered in the negative (CB, 333–4~Fine, 322). Sedley supports Plotinus' negative claim with two arguments: one based on a seemingly unfavourable contrast between moral and intellectual virtues, the other on an interpretation of the passage found at 90 D 1–2. In the next two sections I consider each of these arguments in turn. In the third I provide what I take to be compelling arguments against Sedley's position. In the fourth section I provide an alternative interpretation by explaining why there is an intimate link between moral virtue—particularly justice—happiness, and assimilation to god in the *Timaeus*.

1. An unfavourable contrast between moral and intellectual virtue?

Sedley suggests that the *Republic* presents an unfavourable contrast between moral and intellectual virtues, and a similarly unfavourable contrast is presented in the *Timaeus*. In *Republic* 4 the moral virtues are lauded, but by book 7 they are left behind for intellectual virtue. He quotes Socrates near the end of book 7:

[2] The latter part of Sedley's article is devoted to arguing that the contemplative ideal of *Nicomachean Ethics* bk. 10 is indebted to the *Timaeus*.

Hence the so-called virtues of the soul look likely to be close to those of the body—for actually when we do not at first have them we seem to acquire them by habit and practice—whereas the virtue of wisdom really does prove to belong, it seems, to something more divine. (CB, 334~Fine, 322; *Rep.* 518 D–E)

Sedley claims that

a similarly unfavourable contrast of moral with intellectual virtue is exactly the point brought out by the *Timaeus* passage [*presumably* 90 C–D]. Moral virtue, the harmony of the three soul-parts, is recommended in passing at the outset [*presumably* 86 B–90 A] but supreme happiness is located not there but in the godlike state of the rational part taken in isolation. (CB, 334~Fine, 322–3)

Let me make two initial points concerning this argument. First, unlike the *Republic*, the *Timaeus* contains no disparaging remarks about the 'so-called virtues' (ἀρεταὶ καλούμεναι, *Rep.* 518 D 9). Second, we should note that Sedley's comparison with the *Republic* is apt. At the beginning of the *Timaeus*, Socrates' summary of what he calls 'yesterday's conversations' should bring the *Republic* to mind.[3]

But does the *Republic* passage support Sedley's claim that in the *Timaeus* 'we find a similarly unfavorable contrast of moral with intellectual virtue' (CB, 334~Fine, 322–3)? This is by no means clear. An alternative reading of the passage is that the status of the moral virtues differs depending on whether or not they are separated from the virtue of wisdom. On the one hand, moral virtues separated from the virtue of wisdom are merely 'so-called', 'quasi'-virtues because they are based on nothing better than habit and practice. On the other hand, moral virtues united with wisdom are transformed into virtues in a full sense. This alternative reading is supported by texts that follow close upon the *Republic* 7 passage cited by Sedley.[4] Glaucon objects that it seems unjust to require the philosophers who have seen the Form of the Good to 'descend back into the cave' and to rule there (519 D). But Socrates persuades Glaucon both that this is not an injustice and that the philosophers will heed orders to rule because 'We will be giving just orders to just people' (520 E). Indeed, at the end of book 7 Socrates claims

[3] Sedley notes this (CB, 331~Fine 319).

[4] Sedley kindly pointed out that Christopher Bobonich makes a similar suggestion in *Plato's Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics* (Oxford, 2002), 205–6.

that true philosophers 'regard justice as the most important and essential thing' (540 E).[5] These passages suggest, *contra* Sedley, that justice is more than a mere 'quasi-virtue'. I submit that the proper understanding of these passages in the *Republic* and the *Timaeus* is that genuine wisdom does not leave moral virtues behind, as Sedley claims; rather, genuine wisdom brings moral virtues to their full flower.

2. *Timaeus* 90 D 1–2: 'We should correct the corrupted revolutions in our head . . .'

The second and really fundamental argument put forward by Sedley is this. He finds textual warrant at *Tim.* 90 D 1–2 for his claim that moral virtues are not part of the godlikeness ideal: 'We should correct the corrupted revolutions in our head *concerned with becoming* (*περὶ τὴν γένεσιν*, emphasis added)' (CB, 334~Fine, 323). Sedley points out that most translators render the phrase *περὶ τὴν γένεσιν* differently. I shall consider the translation issue below, but for the moment let us carefully consider the argument Sedley bases on his translation.

[5] There are two seemingly powerful objections to my fundamental claim that moral virtue, especially justice, is an essential component of the best human life. I address them here because they cite nearby *Republic* passages. First, Socrates indicates that philosophers are compelled to rule (e.g. 500 D and 519 D ff.). If justice demands that they rule and justice is a component of the philosophers' happiness, then no compulsion should be needed. Second, at 7, 520 A–B, Socrates claims that philosophers not nurtured in the ideal state are not obligated to rule. But if they were so concerned for justice and the good of the whole, then philosophers would be so obligated.

I have addressed the first objection in 'Do Plato's Philosopher-Rulers Sacrifice Self-Interest to Justice?', *Phronesis*, 32 (1992), 265–82, esp. 266–72. In brief, I argue that philosophers are compelled to rule; they are not compelled to be just. Indeed, what they find compelling is the fact that justice demands that they rule in this case. The demands of justice are compelling precisely because justice is an essential component of the philosopher's happiness. My response to the second objection is this. At 7, 520 A–B, Socrates states that, in contrast to philosophers nurtured in the model city, philosophers who 'arise spontaneously' in a city 'against the will of the constitution' (*αὐτόματοι γὰρ ἐμφύονται ἀκούσης τῆς ἐν ἑκάστῃ πολιτείας*, 520 B 2–3) are 'justified in not sharing in their city's labours' (*εἰκότως οὐ μετέχουσι τῶν ἐν αὐταῖς πόνων*, 520 B 1–2). The non-ideal cities systematically pervert people who might be philosophers (494 B), so that those who succeed in becoming philosophers do not share the values of these cities. This is the force of saying that philosophers have arisen in the city '*against* the will of the constitution'. These philosophers are 'justified in not sharing in their city's labours' because the labours of the city are directed at the wrong values.

(a) *Sedley's translation: 'We should correct the corrupted revolutions in our head concerned with becoming' (Timaeus 90 D 1–2)*

Sedley writes:

> I take the obvious sense of the text [90 D 1–2] to be that it is by focusing our thoughts on becoming, rather than on being, that we have distorted our intellect's naturally circular motions . . . the text strongly suggests that our assimilation to 'the revolutions of the world-soul' is meant to get us away from our thoughts about becoming. What we are urged to share with the world soul, then, does not include its practical reasoning. (CB, 335~Fine, 323)

Is Sedley right? First, even on his rendering, the text does not urge us to *stop* thinking about becoming altogether; rather, it urges us to *correct* (*ἐξορθοῦντα*, 90 D 3) the way we think about becoming. At the very least we may say that the sense Sedley attributes to the text is not as obvious as he suggests.

Sedley proposes two further arguments to support his interpretation. The first is contained in the following passage:

> What we are urged to share with the world soul, then, does not include its practical reasoning. That might be like what we have already seen to be forbidden in the case of colour mixture [67 D–68 D]—trying to replicate god's providential work in the organization of matter. (CB, 335~Fine, 323)

Although here Sedley concedes that the world soul engages in practical reasoning, he tries to build a case for the claim that practical reasoning is not part of assimilation to god based on a certain likeness which he perceives between, on the one hand, the prohibition on attempts 'to replicate god's providential work in the organization of matter' in the case of the colour-mixture text and, on the other hand, the presumed exclusion of practical reasoning from the assimilation of our thoughts to those of the world soul. I am not sure in what exact sense the two cases 'might be like' each other in a way relevant to the point at issue. Using practical reason to promote goodness within the framework established by god's providential work seems quite different from hubristically trying to replicate the providential work itself. Furthermore, Sedley himself discusses (Fine, 311–15) passages in other dialogues in which moral virtues are specifically linked to assimilation to god, most famously in the digression of the *Theaetetus* (176), so that the prima facie case is against Sedley's claim. Indeed, I do not think Sedley assumes

that this argument carries much of the burden in establishing his position. So we must turn to his other argument.

Sedley's second argument is this. One corrects one's thinking by 'learning the harmonies and revolutions of the whole world', thereby bringing one's understanding back into conformity with its objects (90 D). This learning takes us out of the realm of practical reasoning into the realm of mathematics (39 B, 47 A),[6] thereby leaving practical reasoning behind: 'As in the *Republic*, so too in the *Timaeus*, the study of astronomy is valued for its ability to turn our minds away from becoming and towards being' (CB, 335~Fine, 323). This is half true. In the *Republic* learning astronomy certainly is instrumentally valuable as a step towards the realm of being and ultimately knowledge of the Form of the Good, but this does not simply leave practical reasoning behind. Socrates claims that if we do not know the Form of the Good, 'even the fullest possible knowledge of all other things is of no benefit to us' (505 A); by implication one cannot properly engage in practical reasoning without the wisdom acquired by knowledge of the Form of the Good. In short, a turn towards being is necessary to bring practical reason to fruition so that one can return to the realm of becoming to promote goodness on the pattern of the philosopher-rulers of the *Republic*. Sedley provides no compelling reason to think that similar considerations do not apply in the case of the *Timaeus*.

But if we reject Sedley's interpretation, how then should we understand the passage correctly? I propose the following. The most basic error in thinking about becoming is to mistake becoming for fundamental reality—an error akin to that of the prisoners in the cave who mistake shadows for realities (*Rep.* 7, 514 A ff.). The cure for this is accepting the three fundamental principles that the character Timaeus articulates at the beginning of his discourse. First, there is a distinction between being and becoming (27 D). Next, everything that is generated has a cause (28 A). Finally, the world of becoming is modelled on an eternal exemplar that is comprehensible by rational discourse (28 A, 29 A). I suggest that to grasp these principles is to correct one's thinking about becoming, so that one's thoughts emulate those of the world soul. This interpretation makes sense of the passage within the broader of the fundamental themes of the *Timaeus*.

[6] See Sedley in CB, 328~Fine, 316.

(*b*) *The other translation: 'We should redirect the revolutions in our heads that were thrown off course at the time of birth'* (*Timaeus* 90 D 1–2)

Let me now go back to the issue of the translation of the text at *Tim.* 90 D 1–2. Sedley's translation is: 'We should correct the corrupted revolutions in our head *concerned with becoming*.' The widely accepted alternative translation is represented by Zeyl's rendering, 'We should redirect the revolutions in our heads that were thrown off course *at the time of birth*.'[7] The fundamental difference is how the phrase *περὶ τὴν γένεσιν* is rendered. On the one hand, Sedley argues against a rendering such as Zeyl's: 'the only point of a chronological *περί* could be to stress the approximateness of the temporal reference—"*around* the time of . . .", and I cannot see what would motivate this in the present context' (CB, 334~Fine, 323). On the other hand, Zeyl claims[8] that the phrase *περὶ τὴν γένεσιν* is naturally taken as adverbial with *διεφθαρμένας* ('corrupted', 90 D 2). With a slight amendment which takes into account Sedley's point, I think Zeyl's rendering is preferable. For this rendering, unlike Sedley's, suggests the reference back to the previous discussion of the corruption and subsequent correction of the revolutions in our head at 43 A–44 A.[9] Moreover, there is an answer to Sedley's question as to what motivates the use of a chronological *περί* in the passage.

The passage at 90 D 1–2 is not the first time the damage to the revolutions in us has been discussed. At 42 E–44 C Plato presents a description of the work done by the lesser gods in fashioning bodies for human souls. The disorderly motions set up in the body 'violently shake the orbits of the soul', the result being that these motions 'mutilated and disfigured the circles in every possible way so that the circles barely held together and though they remained in motion, they moved without rhyme or reason' (43 D–E). These earlier passages make it clear that the corruption of the revolutions is attendant upon becoming incarnated. Sedley recognizes this, and agrees with the timing implied by Zeyl's translation: 'The immortal, rational soul-part, housed in the head, has naturally circular motions like those of the heavens, but from the moment of birth

[7] See Zeyl's translation of the *Timaeus* in J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, 1997), 1224–91.

[8] Zeyl kindly shared his thoughts on this topic.

[9] Zeyl makes this reference explicit in a footnote (44) which links the phrase 'at our birth' with the section at 43 A–44 A.

these are bombarded and disrupted by the rectilinear motions associated especially with perception' (CB, 329~Fine, 316–17). The timing of this corruption seems to be captured by the phrase *περὶ τὴν γένεσιν* at 90 D 1–2.

Now let us turn to Sedley's question: what motivates the use of a chronological *περί* to stress the approximateness of the temporal reference? To answer this we must consider the process of the corruption of revolutions described at 43 C–E:

> Disturbances would occur when the body encountered and collided with external fire [i.e. fire other than the body's own] or for that matter with a hard lump of earth or with the flow of gliding waters, or when it was caught up by a surge of air-driven winds. The motions produced by all these encounters would then be conducted through the body to the soul and strike against it . . . it was just then, at that very instant, that they produced a very long and intense commotion. They cooperated with the continually flowing channel to stir and violently shake the orbits of the soul. They completely bound that of the Same by flowing against it in the opposite direction, and held it fast just as it was beginning to go its own way. And they further shook the orbit of the Different right through . . . They mutilated and disfigured the circles in every possible way. (43 C–E)

Plato suggests that the disruption takes place at a very specific time: 'it was just then, at that very instant' (*καὶ δὴ καὶ τότε ἐν τῷ παρόντι*, 43 C 7). When is this exactly? Sedley and Zeyl agree that the disruption occurs at birth, but this may not be accurate. The disruption begins to occur when a person first encounters external stimuli, which happens no later than the time of birth, but perhaps even earlier. An expectant mother often feels the movements of the child within her womb. It is not unreasonable to think that such movements are the reaction to some stimulus that has been transmitted to the foetus within the womb.[10] If so, then the disruptions to the revolutions begin even before birth. This would mean that we cannot make any general rule about the precise time at which human revolutions begin to be disrupted, so the most accurate way

[10] I have been unable to find any corroboration for this view in Plato or in the literature available to him. But at Arist. *Pol.* 7. 17 we have the following passage: 'if couples have children in excess, *let abortion be procured before sense and life have begun; what may or may not be done lawfully in these cases depends on the question of life and sensation*' (1335^{b}23–6; the Greek of the italicized portion is *πρὶν αἴσθησιν ἐγγενέσθαι καὶ ζωὴν ἐμποιεῖσθαι δεῖ τὴν ἄμβλωσιν· τὸ γὰρ ὅσιον καὶ τὸ μὴ διωρισμένον τῇ αἰσθήσει καὶ τῷ ζῆν ἔσται*). This passage at least attests that Greek thought soon after Plato did conceive of the possibility that prior to birth a human may experience sensations.

to describe the time at which these disruptions begin is with a suitably approximate expression such as *περὶ τὴν γένεσιν*, 'around the time of birth', the exact phrase Plato uses. I suggest, then, that the passage be rendered, 'We should redirect the revolutions in our heads that were thrown off around the time of our birth.' If this translation is accurate, then we must reject Sedley's most powerful argument.

3. Justice, the good life, and godlikeness

In fact, *contra* Sedley, we have good reason to believe that moral virtue is an aspect of assimilation to god in the *Timaeus*. Here are some relevant texts.

As he is about to fashion human souls, the Demiurge exhorts the lesser deities[11] to whom he hands over the task of fashioning human bodies:

> Imitate the power I used in causing you to be. And to the extent it is fitting for them to possess something that shares our name 'immortal', something described as divine and ruling within those of them who always consent to follow after justice [*δίκῃ*] and after you, I shall begin sowing that seed, and then hand it over to you. (41 C–D)

Here justice is explicitly linked with the immortal and divine aspect of humans, and this link is reinforced shortly thereafter. The Demiurge goes on to explain that with incarnation come various emotions:

> And if they could master these emotions, their lives would be just [*δίκῃ βιώσοιντο*], whereas if they are mastered by them, they would be unjust [*κρατηθέντες δὲ ἀδικίᾳ*]. And if a person lived a good life throughout the due course of his time, he would at the end return to his dwelling place in his companion star, to live a life of happiness that agreed with this character.

[11] Perhaps one might object that we should not take this speech seriously. For example, Sedley suggests that the Demiurge's speech to the lesser gods is not meant to be taken literally (CB, 329~Fine, 317). And certainly one must agree with him, up to a point. Presumably Plato is using the mythical motif of a speech by the Demiurge to the lesser deities to make certain points that should be taken literally. Indeed, the fact that the words are put in the mouth of the greatest of all deities, the Demiurge himself, should give them added weight. As far as I can tell, there is no good reason to think that my argument depends on any premisses that should be rejected because they are part of the myth that will not survive demythologizing (or 'deliteralisation', as Sedley puts it).

But if he failed this, he would be born a second time, now as a woman. And if even then he still could not refrain from wickedness, he would change once again, this time into some wild animal that resembled the wicked character he had acquired. (42 B–C)

In sum, a just life is a good life that leads to happiness; an unjust life leads not simply to unhappiness, but even to a less than human life. Two other items corroborate this.

First, as we saw above at 42 B–C, it is said that the person who has failed to live a good life, i.e. a just life, 'would be reborn a second time, now as a woman'. At 90 E, immediately following the discussion of the correction of the revolutions in us, this theme of rebirth is restated: 'According to our likely account, all male-born humans who lived lives of cowardice or injustice [*ἀδίκως*] were reborn in the second generation as women' (90 E 6–91 A 1). We are put off by Plato's sexist assumptions, but the link already made in the earlier passage between justice and the good life is re-emphasized.

Second, let us return to the Demiurge's exhortation to the lesser deities at 42 B–C quoted above. In that passage the rewards of the afterlife are mentioned; no mention is made of happiness in this life. But the later discussion of the correction of our revolutions at 90 concludes:

And when this conformity [i.e. the conformity of our revolutions to what they should be] is complete, we shall have achieved our goal: that most excellent life offered to humankind by the gods, both now and for evermore [*πρός τε τὸν παρόντα καὶ τὸν ἔπειτα χρόνον*]. (90 D 5–7)[12]

What is clear is that the most excellent life is offered to humans now, *even in this life*. There should be no doubt that this most excellent life in the present is the same just life which was said to reap a *post mortem* reward in the earlier passage.

The above considerations show that the correction of the revolutions of the human soul in imitation of the world soul by which humans assimilate themselves to the divine does *not* leave behind moral virtue or practical reasoning. Quite the contrary: when humans correct their revolutions and achieve assimilation to the divine, by that very fact they also achieve a genuinely just life.

[12] Sedley translates this as 'by creating this resemblance, bring to fulfilment (*telos*) the best life offered by the gods to mankind for present and future time' (CB, 332~Fine, 320).

4. An alternative interpretation: justice as an essential aspect of *nous*

Let me turn now to my own interpretation of assimilation to the divine in the *Timaeus*, with the aim of explaining why Plato includes justice as an aspect of correcting the revolutions in our souls, imitating the world soul's revolutions, and assimilating ourselves to god so that we achieve happiness. In a nutshell, I argue as follows. Humans share *nous* (*νοῦς*) with the world soul (itself a lesser divinity) and with the Demiurge himself (the highest deity). Although *nous* is most intuitively associated with knowledge and wisdom, Plato also suggests that it is intrinsic to *nous* to be a cause, a cause that arranges things as far as possible to achieve both the good of all individuals and the common good as well. In virtue of its aim, *nous* is intrinsically oriented towards justice: justice is the pre-eminent other-regarding virtue for the Greeks, so that the promotion of justice and the promotion of the aim of *nous* are mutually entailing. The most important part of a human being is the divine part, *nous*, so the core of human happiness is the proper functioning of *nous*, which is the achievement of the aims of *nous* as far as possible. Thus, one who attains happiness does so above all by achieving the aims of *nous* as far as he or she is able, and this very fact entails that he or she be just. In short, to aspire to likeness to god is to pursue human happiness, and to achieve likeness to god and happiness one must be just.

Let me begin by quoting Sedley's own admirable summary of the dialogue:

The *Timaeus* is Plato's great attempt to show how the world can only be adequately understood if viewed as the product of divine intelligence. What emerges from it is that the human soul's capacity to pattern itself after a divine mind is far from accidental, but directly reflects the soul's own nature and origin and the teleological structure of the world as a whole. (CB, 328~Fine, 316)

This is certainly right. In the *Timaeus* the world is proclaimed to be the product of the divine intelligence, i.e. *Nous*. Indeed, the very best characterization of the Demiurge of the *Timaeus* is as divine *nous*, as is seen particularly from three passages: 'I have presented what has been crafted by Intellect [*τὰ διὰ νοῦ δεδημιουργημένα*]'

(47 E 4); the Demiurge is presented as the personification of *nous* persuading and overruling Necessity (*ἀνάγκη*, 48 A 2); and the god's model is described as what '*nous* . . . contemplates' (39 E 7–9).[13] In the *Phaedo* Socrates had hypothesized about how things would be if *Nous* ruled the world (97 C); here in the *Timaeus* we learn definitively that *Nous* does so rule and what the results of its ruling are. The same specification that it is *Nous* that governs the universe is also found at *Laws* 12, 966 E, where *Nous* is referred to as that 'which is responsible for the order in the universe', and, perhaps most explicitly, in the *Philebus*, where *Nous* is specified as the cause of the mixture of the limited and the unlimited (30 B), which is 'for ever the ruler over the universe' (30 D). In these passages Plato is underscoring that *nous* cannot be identified simply with that which knows and contemplates. *Nous* does all that, of course, but it also does more: by its very nature *nous* is a cause that orders things to achieve their goodness. This point is emphasized in the *Timaeus* itself in a passage in which Timaeus (in an echo of *Phaedo* 99 A–B) distinguishes between primary and secondary causes:

> So anyone who is a lover of understanding [*νοῦ*] and knowledge [*ἐπιστήμης*] must of necessity pursue as primary causes those that belong to intelligent nature [*τὰς τῆς ἔμφρονος φύσεως αἰτίας πρώτας*], and as secondary all those belonging to things that are moved by others and that set still others in motion by necessity. We too, surely, must do likewise: we must describe both types of causes, distinguishing those that possess understanding and thus fashion what is beautiful and good [*ὅσαι μετὰ νοῦ καλῶν καὶ ἀγαθῶν δημιουργοί*], from those which, when deserted by intelligence [*ὅσαι μονωθεῖσαι φρονήσεως*], produce only haphazard and disorderly effects every time. (46 D 7–E 6)[14]

The world soul is specifically fashioned by the Demiurge 'to be the [world's] body's mistress and to rule over it as her subject' (34 C), for, to quote Sedley, 'the world soul is no detached intellect, it is the governing principle of the world, concerned with the good of the whole cosmic organism' (CB, 334~Fine, 322). As the *Philebus* indicates, it is the nature of intellect to be a cause, a cause of the mixing of things, just as the Demiurge is the cause of the mixing that results in the world soul and human souls. The purpose of the

[13] S. Menn, *Plato on God as* Nous (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1995), 10. The entire book is very instructive.

[14] Note that in this passage Timaeus uses *νοῦς* and and *φρόνησις* interchangeably.

mixing is also clear: it is the purpose ascribed to the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*:

> He was good, and the one who is good can never become jealous of anything. And so being free of jealousy, he wanted everything to become as much like himself as possible . . . The god wanted everything to be good and nothing bad so far as that was possible. (29 E–30 A)

This is an echo of what Socrates says in the *Phaedo*. If *Nous*, 'Mind' in the passages below, were the directing cause of things, then

> Mind would direct everything and arrange each thing in the way that was best. (97 C)[15]

> I never thought that Anaxagoras, who said those things were directed by Mind, would bring in any other cause for them than that it was best for them to be as they are. Once he had given the best for each as the cause for each and the general cause of all, I thought he would go on to explain the common good for all. (98 A–B)

This same goal is attributed to the ruling god of the universe in the very late dialogue the *Laws*, in a passage in which the Athenian Stranger is pretending to address a young non-believer (10, 903 B–D). The Stranger emphasizes that the ruler of the universe arranges even the minutest details so that the whole universe will be as good as possible.

In each of these three dialogues, the goal is to fashion things such that the whole as well as each individual within the whole is as good as can be. Presumably this is why the Demiurge of the *Timaeus* fashions the universe on the pattern of a single living organism (30 C ff.): in a well-functioning organism the good of the parts and the good of the whole are harmoniously intertwined so that they are mutually entailing. By using such a pattern the Demiurge achieves his aim of making 'everything to be good and nothing bad so far as that was possible' (29 E). This does not entail that one strives for goods that cannot be achieved; even the Demiurge works within the realm of the possible, and those who follow him must also measure their success based on what it is possible for them to achieve.

Human beings have their share of *nous*. This is quite explicit in the passage quoted above concerning the correction of the revolutions in our heads, the purpose of which is to 'make the thinking

[15] But, as the *Timaeus* emphasizes, *Nous* is not the only cause: *Nous* is limited in the goodness it can produce by 'Necessity', *Ἀνάγκη*, which has 'the character of the "Straying Cause"' (*τὸ τῆς πλανωμένης εἶδος αἰτίας*), 48 A 6–7).

subject [τὸ κατανοοῦν] resemble the object of its thought [κατανοούμενῳ]' (90 D 4, Sedley's translation as above),[16] and this part is continually referred to as the divine part in this section (e.g. τὸ θεῖον, 90 A 8). It is this aspect of the human being that is made by the Demiurge himself, using the leftover ingredients in the mixing bowl he used to fashion the world soul (41 D), before he turns over to lesser gods the task of fashioning the rest of the human being. Thus our divine part, that part for which one is caring when one corrects the revolutions in one's head, is like the world soul and the Demiurge himself in that our divine part is also *nous*.

It would seem to follow that the most important aspect of the human being, *nous*, would share the functions and the aims of *nous* which are attributed to the Demiurge and the world soul. Furthermore, since *nous* is our divine and best part, by achieving these aims humans also attain the very core of human happiness. If this is so, then being just is an essential part of human happiness. Being just implies doing what one can do for the good of others, thereby fulfilling one of the fundamental aims of *nous*. Indeed, the way in which Socrates typifies justice is represented by the examples in book 4 of a well-functioning psyche and a well-functioning state in which each part contributes to the good of others and to the good of the whole. I suggest that this is why the *locus classicus* of Plato's doctrine of assimilation to god in the *Theaetetus* has Socrates emphasize that because god is supremely just, justice is the most salient feature of our likeness to god (176 B).[17] Justice aims at the harmonious good of all, which is also the aim of *nous*. Like god, the good human strives to fulfil the aims of *nous* in part by aiming at justice, and to the extent that he or she attains this aim, he or she also attains happiness.[18]

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

[17] For an analysis of the relevant passages see T. A. Mahoney, 'Is Platonic Assimilation to God in the *Theaetetus* Purely Otherworldly?', *Ancient Philosophy* (forthcoming).

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

5. Summary and conclusion

David Sedley argues that assimilation to god in the *Timaeus* leaves behind moral virtue and practical reasoning. We have examined his arguments and found them wanting. *Contra* Sedley, I have argued that moral virtue—particularly justice—and the practical reasoning justice entails are integral parts of assimilation to god in the *Timaeus*. This is because gods and humans share *nous*, which aims not only at knowledge but also at the ordering of things for the best as far as this is possible. Things are arranged for the best precisely when justice prevails. Since *nous* is the most divine part of human beings, the aims of *nous* define the core of human happiness. Thus when humans succeed in assimilating themselves to god by attaining the aims of *nous* as far as they are able, *ipso facto* they are both just and happy.

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