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# The Dialogue Form and the "Developmental" Approach to Plato

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Abstract. This paper asks the question: where — if anywhere — is Plato *himself* in the dialogues? Its conclusion is that he is to be found in three positions consistently maintained and defended by his lead-interlocutors across a lifetime of writing: essentialism, functionalism (teleology), and the belief that the human soul is distinct from the body, survives the death of the body, and is in its rational part or aspect immortal. For the rest, a number of ideas which are canvassed at particular points of his writing lifetime by various interlocutors (including some that have gone on to become very famous) are simply that — ideas, which form part of his ongoing search, through dialogue, for the truth of things, but are not, as it turns out, ideas which he himself adhered to without question till the end. Among such ideas is the famous Theory of Forms as transcendental essences, a theory which, I argue, is prominent in his 'middle' period of writing but has very likely been abandoned by the time he writes his last dialogue, the *Laws*. The same goes, I maintain, for the famous doctrine of the tri-partition of soul; it is a prominent feature of the middle dialogues, but seems to have been discarded by the time he writes the *Laws*. Concomitant with this, the celebrated doctrine of justice as a harmony of the three parts of soul has, in the *Laws*, also apparently been jettisoned, and replaced by something much closer to the very modern-sounding theory of justice-as-fairness.
Keywords: Demiurge, developmentalism, dialogues, essentialism, functionalism, immortality, justice, *Laws*, *Parmenides*, *Phaedo*, Plato, reason, *Republic*, soul, Theory of Forms, *Timaeus*, tri-partition.

Why did Plato write dialogues? And where — if anywhere — does he himself feature in them? I ask this question at the outset because, *prima facie*, Plato is not to be found in his dialogues; the one time he mentions himself, in the *Phaedo*, it is to say that he wasn't in fact there (!) at the discussion that forms the core of the work. So we are back to our question — what if anything, do the dialogues say, and if they do say anything, how much of it, if anything — and what specifically — can be

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said to be the thoughts of Plato himself? And what counts as evidence in the construction of a *case* in any if these matters?

These are difficult questions, as I think anyone would agree, and profoundly important to get clear on if we are to have any chance of talking with any degree of assurance about "Plato"'s thinking on anything. I say 'get clear on' knowing full well that what counts as clarity for one scholar may not count as clarity for another, but one has to start somewhere, and state the best case one can. So why don't we begin.

If philosophers have something to say, they usually — with the exception of a few early writers, such as Parmenides and Empedocles, who wrote in verse — state their views in pieces of continuous prose. Plato, strikingly, chose to write in dialogue form instead. He does not tell us directly why, but one can infer from a number of passages, particularly in the *Phaedrus*, that he thought this the form of written expression closest to speech, and on those grounds, the closest written form we have to the optimal situation for philosophizing, which is, according to the character he calls Socrates, the give-and-take of spoken rational discourse (διαλεκτική) among a group of interlocutors.

Let us assume, just to get ourselves off the ground, that this is a reasonable explanation of Plato's choice of the dialogue form. But it still leaves our original questions unanswered. Many scholars assume that the dominant figure (whom I shall usually call the 'lead-interlocutor') in the dialogues, usually Socrates, or occasionally a 'Visitor from Elea' (in the *Laws*, exceptionally, 'the Athenian', in the *Parmenides* the philosopher Parmenides, and in the *Timaeus* a person of that same name), is a 'carrier' for the views of Plato himself at the time he wrote the dialogue in question. This has a certain *prima facie* plausibility, but it would be a lot more plausible if Plato had written treatises not dialogues, where a clear argument could be put forward and maintained, and one could say with some force at the end of one of them (call it the *Phaedo*) that its author — say, Socrates, serving as a stand-in for his pupil Plato — had in the piece proffered and defended five identifiable arguments for the immortality of the human soul. But the real *Phaedo* is of course not really like this at all. It does have a dominant

figure, Socrates, who does put forward and defend a notable set of arguments for immortality, but in an atmosphere where even he comes across as thinking they are at best suasions, and finishes up admitting that even the best-looking two of them depend upon a prior acceptance of a theory of Forms which he senses his pupils might well find it hard to accept (107ab).

And this is a typical situation when we are looking at dialogues not treatises. What is the 'view' of Plato, for example, in a dialogue like the *Euthyphro*, where — on the assumption that the lead-interlocutor, Socrates, is the 'carrier' for the views of Plato — no definition of piety (the dialogue's ostensible goal) is in fact reached? Or the view of Socrates, for that matter?

Let's look a little more closely at this. And let us ask three questions in particular. First, are we on the right track in looking for 'Platonic' views at *all* in the dialogues? Second, if we are, are we on the right track in expecting to find them in views on various topics put forward at various points by a dialogue's lead-interlocutor? And finally, if the answer to the first two questions can be answered satisfactorily, what are we to make of situations where the lead-interlocutor appears to proffer and defend *p* in one dialogue and *not-p* in another?

In answer to the first question, my own instinct is to look for where Plato *is* at the time in his writing life when he wrote such-and-such a dialogue. What is on his mind, what questions he is struggling to answer. And typically, they will take the form of an 'outer', written discourse (involving a lead-interlocutor who more or less controls the way the discussion goes) which reflects his own *inner* discourse as he struggles with various problems. It is a snap-shot photo from the never-ending video of his own intellectual and emotional life, to be followed by another snap-shot a couple of years later, and so on, over a writing life-time of around fifty years.

Can one talk of 'views' in this context, and more specifically of lead-interlocutor as the carrier of them? One probably can on occasion, but one needs to proceed with caution. Suppose we find, across the entire span of dialogues, from the *Apology* to the *Laws*, an assumption (covert

or overt) which the lead-interlocutor never deviates from and defends vigorously against any interlocutor who suggests otherwise. Here, it seems to me, one might reasonably affirm that Plato himself held the same view and did not deviate from it. Suppose, by contrast, it is a view which is the absolute contrary of everything else a lead-interlocutor affirms on a particular topic, which he puts forward on a single occasion only, and never returns to. Can we claim that it is a view of Plato? Hardly. Can we claim that it was an idea which once crossed his mind and he thought worth bringing up for discussion? Very possibly, particularly if he felt, as I think he may well have, that his dialogues did not cease with the good-byes of the interlocutors but were expected to continue on in the mind of the reader, who was invited and encouraged to re-examine the topic, and following λόγος as his guide, draw whatever conclusions seemed best — whether or not those conclusions were those drawn by the dialogue's lead-interlocutor. Put differently, the number of a dialogue's interlocutors will not be *x* (the ostensible number) but *x + 1* (the ostensible number plus the reader).

But do we have to be talking about lead-interlocutors at all? If a dialogue is really telling us where Plato *is* at a certain moment in his writing life, what we are really looking at in any given dialogue is a portrait of an inner debate currently exercising Plato's mind and emotions. What is going on seems to me well clarified by reference to Gestalt psychology, in which everything produced by the mind is in some way a part of oneself, and to be ignored at one's peril. So Glaucon and Adeimantus in the *Republic* are there because they too figured in that inner debate in Plato's mind which led to his writing that dialogue. They may not have espoused views that Plato would ultimately support, but their ideas were something he felt important and in need of clear articulation if he was to let readers in on the complexity of his inner struggles over how best to define justice in the soul and in the state. The same goes even for Thrasymachus; part of his strength is the sheer *prima facie* plausibility of many of his arguments, and one can be sure that Plato felt their pull in his heart too, even if he finished up rejecting them.

None of this is to suggest that the lead-interlocutor in a dialogue is not, in broad terms, the carrier of Plato's major conclusions in dialogue, in particular in a dialogue which purports to have conclusions, such as the *Republic*, where justice really does get defined, and in very precise terms. But caution is needed here too, since such conclusions don't necessarily remain the same across dialogues. Tri-partition of soul will be defended vigorously by the lead-interlocutor in one dialogue but bi-partition of soul in another; justice as balance will be defended by the lead-interlocutor in the *Republic* but as fairness in the *Laws*, and so on, leading us back again to the question which of the two — if either — could be considered *Plato*'s view on the matter, and on what evidence.

I had better stop these preliminary remarks here, however, if I am ever going to get to my main topic. But I hope I have said enough to highlight the need for a view of the dialogue form which one can defend before one launches into a discussion of "Plato"'s philosophy. And to this I now turn. When I talk of the 'developmental' approach to his dialogues, let me say at the outset that I am not suggesting that there is any connection between change and philosophical progress; development can sometimes involve a change for the worse, as the world of nature strikingly on occasion evinces; the development of antlers too big and heavy for it, not the guns of hunters, were what turned out to be contrary to the best interests of the Irish Elk, and brought about its untimely end. In the case of Plato, a number of scholars still think the philosophizing to be found in Plato's so-called 'early' period is considerably superior to the philosophizing of the second period — the one in which he first proffered and defended a theory of apparently transcendental Forms as the ground of the real and the ground of conduct, and which Professor G.E.L. Owen was wont to refer to as his 'mad' period. Fortunately — goes the argument — Plato took steps to correct this great error in a series of dialogues in his final period which (surprise, surprise) Owen and many of his contemporaries, a significant number of them in or from Oxford, found agreeably consonant with their own particular style of philosophizing.

In my own paper I hope to stay neutral on all this, accepting simply that development can be in any direction, and leaving for a quite different paper or papers at some later time what I myself think of the philosophical worth of what seem to me possible changes of mind by Plato on a few topics — some of them very important ones — amidst a whole set of equally if not more important commitments which, I shall be arguing, in fact remain strikingly *firm* across a writing lifetime.

Following the research of Lutosławski and Campbell and others in the nineteenth century and Brandwood in the twentieth,[1] and prefacing the whole issue — as I have just done — with some remarks on the dialogue form in which Plato chose to express himself, I follow many scholars in continuing to see the dialogues as falling into three main groups, 'early' (sometimes called 'Socratic'), 'middle' (sometimes called 'metaphysical') and 'late' (sometimes called 'critical'). The early ones have Socrates as their lead-interlocutor, and are thought by many to be very likely closest in form to the way the historical Socrates conversed. Most of them set out to define a major term, such as bravery or piety, and finish up failing to do so. The middle dialogues, relatively few in number, have the Theory of Forms (apparently transcendental in nature) as their dominant feature; central to this set is the *Republic*. The final group of dialogues, somewhat heterogeneous in nature, shows us a Plato apparently on the defensive about a number of important topics, not least the Theory of (transcendental) Forms and (in the *Statesman* and *Laws*) the concept of justice.

The boundaries of the three groups of dialogues are rough, as can be expected. If the *Meno* and *Gorgias* are to be placed in the early period, they will almost certainly, given their content, have to be placed near the end of it. If the *Parmenides*, a dialogue in which the Theory of Forms is much criticized by a Parmenides figure, represents a time when Plato was under a good deal of criticism on the matter by the young Aristotle, it might well have been the first dialogue in the last group or the last dialogue in the second group, in either case serving as a bridge to the more 'defensive' dialogues of the last group. And there will continue

[1] Lutosławski 1897; Campbell 1867; Brandwood 1990.

to be dispute over where to place the *Timaeus* in all of this. Is it the last hurrah of the full-blown Theory of Forms, and so likely locatable in place and time at or near the end of the middle group, and hence written not too long after the *Republic* (and before the criticisms of the *Parmenides*), or is it a pivotal work of the *final* period, written by a Plato firmly maintaining the Theory of Forms to the end *despite* the criticisms of the Parmenides? And where is one to place the *Phaedrus*? As the very first of all the dialogues (with Schleiermacher,[2] though with almost nobody else), or somewhere perhaps during the final period?

The correct placement of the outliers here, the *Parmenides*, *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus,* is certainly problematic, and unlikely ever to be solved to everyone's satisfaction, but it is not I think so problematic as to bring down the general plausibility of the categorization of the dialogues into three overall groups. And I now wish to spend some time looking at the salient features of major dialogues in these groups, particularly the middle and last groups, paying special attention to what I have been saying about the dialogue form and what Plato was up to in choosing it as his means of communication.

Let me start with a few words on the first group, the so-called 'Socratic' dialogues. As I mentioned earlier, these are characterized by a failure to reach a definition of a chosen term, such as piety or bravery. But *en route* to such failure some bad definitions get rejected, and it could well be argued, as a number of modern philosophers have argued, that the search is a worthwhile philosophical endeavour in itself, regardless of whether a definition is reached or not. And what is Plato trying to do in these dialogues? Are they simply an act of *pietas* on his part, in which he is just doing his best to recall a number of occasions when the historical Socrates really did engage in discussions of this sort, and when he really did finish up failing to reach a sought-for definition? This seems to me a very genuine possibility, though one also quite compatible with the further possibility that, as the period drew to an end, he was beginning to have thoughts of his own which would differ — possibly very greatly differ — from those upheld by his teacher.

[2] Cf. Schleiermacher 1817.

One of these differences might have been simply at the level of the assumption — a very big assumption — of the doctrine of essentialism. Throughout the so-called Socratic dialogues Socrates assumes it as more or less self-evident that general terms refer, and that their referents are real things, not just concepts (a point made with great firmness in the *Parmenides* 182bc). And there is no hint that his pupil Plato thinks otherwise. Nor is there any attempt by Socrates to establish the exact ontological status of the referents of general terms. If he feels that such referents are in some way more *real* than natural or manufactured objects — and he certainly gives that impression, — Socrates spends no time trying to explain what he imagines their exact ontological status is. But sooner or later *Plato* will feel the need to spend time on such a search, and with dramatic conclusions. Though never at the expense of essentialism as such; as all lead-interlocutors in the dialogues right up to the very last one, the *Laws*, will firmly maintain — and as Plato himself, one must assume, maintained with them — essentialism was a non-negotiable item among his commitments from the beginning to the end, just as it was for his teacher.

Along with essentialism went functionalism, a doctrine championed by the lead-interlocutor from the very first dialogues till the end. Whether the subject matter at hand was the natural world or the world of artefacts, what was 'out there' had a goal or function (τέλος), and the answer to an appropriate 'why' question could tell us what that τέλος was: eyes are for seeing and hands are for grasping the way knives are for cutting, whatever doubters might say. And again it seems to me reasonable to assume from this that Plato too was a firm functionalist till the end, and that he also found the analogy from the arts and crafts that is consistently invoked in defence of the notion just as compelling as his lead-interlocutors did.

A further assumption, from the beginning to the end of the dialogues, is that of the substantive division of soul and body. How exactly they relate is another question, and Plato will struggle with it till the very end (more on this later). But his soul-body dualism is never in doubt.

At this point we can move on to the middle group of dialogues, consisting of the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*, and possibly the *Timaeus* and *Critias*, though the placement of the latter two here rather than in the final group of dialogues continues to be disputed. And at once things become rather more complicated than when we were dealing with doctrines such as essentialism, functionalism, and mind-body dualism. Let's begin with the *Phaedo*. Here we have a dialogue which purports to be an account of the last hours of Socrates before he drank the hemlock, and famous for a set of attempts to show that the human soul is immortal, and that, because of this, Socrates' young friends have no need to grieve over his imminent death, since he will not in fact be dying at all; his real self — his soul — will survive the destruction of his body and depart in safety for happy, immortal existence elsewhere.

This is something quite new in the dialogues. In the *Apology* Socrates comes across as, if anything, an agnostic about the afterlife and what might go on there; certainly, there is no hint that he believes he will go on forever. In the *Meno*, by contrast, very likely written close to the end of the first group of dialogues, he mentions how he has learnt about how the human soul is in fact immortal. But he has learnt it from 'priests and priestesses' (81a); there is no hint that he thinks immortality is in fact something demonstrable by argument. Now, in the *Phaedo*, he is apparently saying that arguments can indeed be mustered in an attempt to prove it, and several now-famous arguments are set out for our inspection.

Whether the arguments in question really were put forward by Socrates to his pupils a few hours before his death we shall never know. What we do know is that from the time of the writing of the *Phaedo* till the very end of Plato's life, when he was writing the *Laws*, he himself was greatly exercised trying to prove the immortality of both human soul and cosmic soul; the proofs appear as prominent features of the *Republic* (written almost certainly soon after the *Phaedo*), the *Phaedrus*, and the *Laws*. And in all three instances his lead-interlocutors speak with great confidence (the hesitations found in the *Phaedo* are missing), leading me to think that, from early-middle life (when the *Phaedo*

seems to have been written) Plato himself held first that human soul was immortal and later on (in the *Phaedrus* and *Laws*) that soul of *any* sort — including cosmic soul — was immortal. (His beliefs on these matters antecedent to the time he wrote the *Phaedo* we do not know.)

A second striking feature of the *Phaedo* (shared with the *Symposium*, written very likely around the same time) is the use of the apparently newly-minted Theory of Forms in two of the major arguments for immortality. What the Theory shares with Socraticism is its deep essentialism; where it goes off in a direction of its own — and where I strongly suspect Socrates would have been strongly unwilling to follow him — is in the apparently transcendental nature of the Forms in question, which are now described as perfect, non-material, paradigmatic particulars of some sort which serve as the ground of all reality and all conduct and are characterized by a reality-content infinitely greater than that enjoyed by items in, or features of the material world known to sense-perception.

It is perhaps the doctrine by which Plato is best known; in a famous phrase of Cornford,[3] it is (along with the doctrine of soul's immortality) one of the 'twin pillars of Platonism'. But is Cornford right? As I myself have been using the word 'doctrine' in this paper, the word is confined to those theories which lead-interlocutors hold and defend either from the beginning to the end of the dialogues or from some definable point in the dialogues till the end. And by this criterion the Theory of Forms qualifies only very doubtfully as a doctrine. Its importance is beyond doubt, and cannot be underestimated, but its duration as part of Plato's thinking may have been relatively short, especially if the *Timaeus* (where the Theory is in full bloom) was written not long after the *Republic*, and served as perhaps the crowning work of the middle group of dialogues.

The topic is a much contested one, and could absorb the rest of this paper, so I shall confine myself at this point to simply stating my own thoughts on it. As a possible bridge between the middle and last group of dialogues a dialogue of great importance, the *Parmenides*, appeared.

[3] Cornford 1941: xxvii.

In it a very young Socrates is pitted against a very mature Parmenides and asked to defend the Theory of Forms. He has great difficulty doing so, and the criticisms of Parmenides — as early readers would have rapidly realized — are remarkably similar to those published only a short while earlier, in a short work entitled *On Forms* by the young Aristotle, a recent arrival in the Academy. At the end of the discussion Parmenides argues — no doubt to the relief of the young Socrates — that, whatever the force of various criticisms which have been levelled, forms of things must exist and be distinguishable one from another if we are to 'have anything on which to fix [our] thought' and engage in discourse which is significant (135c). This seems to me almost certainly Plato himself talking, expressing his chagrin at the force of Aristotle's criticisms of his Theory, but at the same time serving notice that he is not about to give up without a fight. And if the *Timaeus* post-dates the *Parmenides*, we can say that he undoubtedly does *not* give up, or certainly not immediately; the Theory underpins the entire dialogue, though admittedly now without some of the features that Parmenides has objected to so forcefully to, such as the vagueness of the *range* of general terms that are supposed to refer (it is now made clear, for example, that — talking of the natural world — it is only the terms for *natural kinds* which are referential). If, by contrast, the *Timaeus* antedates the *Parmenides*, the Theory gives all appearances, as the later dialogues get written, of starting to *wane* fairly soon in the face of new interests, on Plato's part, in logic and classification (interests particularly prominent in the notions of Collection and Division in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* and in the notions of Limit and Unlimitedness in the *Philebus*), and by the time we reach the *Laws* the Theory may well have been dropped altogether. The ground of the real and of human conduct has now, to all appearances, become the gods, in particular the 'best soul', 'God', not the Forms, and any further education which the Guardians of the Laws undertake will now consist, not in their contemplation of the Form of the Good, but in ongoing study of the problem of the One and the Many, with a view to their deeper understanding, as leaders of Magnesia, of the unity-amidst-plurality of virtue and vice, good and

evil (965b–966b). Essentialism, in a word — a doctrine which Aristotle is happy to share with his teacher — has survived to the end; transcendental essentialism, after a short but brilliant life, has not.

Along with the Theory of Forms, the theory of the tripartite nature of the human soul seems to me only a doubtful qualifier for the title of being one of Plato's 'doctrines'. It first arises in the *Republic*, in which the tripartite division of Kallipolis is claimed to be analogous to the tripartite division of the human soul. The context is overtly political, and scholars continue to argue over what is supposed to lead to what; does a conviction that the natural division of any *society* into three parts (legislative, executive, and the rest) lead to the conclusion that the *soul* of each and every one of the persons comprising that society must also be divided into three parts, or is it the other way round? Either way, Socrates/Plato risks the accusation of having fallen into a fallacy of either composition or division, since no such conclusion follows in logic. And it seems very possible that Plato (guided by the young Aristotle?) came to see this; certainly, unless one includes the famous notion, in the *Phaedrus*, of the human soul as a chariot driven by a charioteer who has some difficulty controlling the two horses pulling it, the only other reference, after the *Republic*, to the tri-partition of the human soul is in the *Timaeus*, and after that it vanishes from the scene. Just how significant this is emerges from the fact that, after the *Republic*, Plato wrote two more political dialogues, the *Statesman* and the *Laws*. If he still believed in the natural division of societies into three parts (and he does so believe, to all appearances), this would have been an excellent opportunity to re-emphasize the theory of tripartite human soul as its analogue in the matter. But he does nothing of the sort. What does survive, in the *Laws*, are a few *disiecta membra* of the theory, but that is all; the theory in its detail, and the apparent purpose it once served, have vanished from the scene, along with — apparently — the Theory of Forms (at any rate in its transcendentalist version).

I say, 'the theory and the purpose it once served', and this brings me to my final observation on the second group of the dialogues, which concerns Plato's views of justice. Just as his Theory of Forms and his

theory of soul as tripartite constitute, for very many people, the heart of his beliefs in the realm of what one might call metaphysics and philosophical psychology, so his theory of justice as balance of parts within each of two tripartite organisms, the soul and the state, is thought by many (and especially by those who read only the *Republic*) to constitute the very essence of his doctrine of justice in the state and justice in the individual. But this view is in my opinion greatly flawed; Plato, who never stopped thinking (which is why he wrote so many dialogues), never stopped thinking about justice in particular, as I think a close reading of the *Statesman* and *Laws* will quickly make clear. I shall return to this topic when I come to discuss the final group of dialogues; for the moment let me just say that those of you who have not read the *Laws* should expect some surprises…!

We can now turn to that final group of dialogues of which I have just made mention. And let me preface my remarks by reminding you of what for me constitutes evidence that something has a right to be called a Platonic doctrine: it will be any theory which is either espoused and defended from the beginning to the end of the dialogues by the lead-interlocutor or a theory which may appear for the first time part way through the dialogues but is consistently proffered and defended by the lead-interlocutor thereafter.

Let me begin by turning to a topic which has not been discussed so far but is clearly important, and that is the question of the nature, origins and duration of the universe; the nature — more generally — of time and eternity; and the question whether the universe depends (eternally or in time) upon a cause other than itself.

If one excepts the myths in various dialogues, where a personal afterlife for human souls is envisaged, these topics do not figure with any prominence as material for *philosophical* discussion in the early and early-middle dialogues, with one exception; in the *Republic* Socrates talks in passing about a 'Craftsman' (δημιουργός) of the world' and a 'Craftsman of the senses', a notion which will achieve high prominence in the *Timaeus*, a dialogue which, as I have mentioned, I place at the juncture comprising the end of the second group and the beginning of

the third group of dialogues. In this dialogue the chief interlocutor, the possibly fictitious Timaeus (who turns out to be more a teacher than an interlocutor, since he speaks for most of the time in uninterrupted prose) offers what he calls a 'likely account' (εἰκὼς λόγος) or 'likely story' (εἰκὼς μῦθος) (the terms appear to be used more or less synonymously in the context) of the origins and cause of the world, and the following picture emerges:

1. Matter and space are sempiternal existents, that is, they are endowed with what we could call rectilinear duration, but differ from the physical objects of our acquaintance in possessing no beginning or end in time. They are also each sempiternal in their motion, and ceaselessly mutually affect the motion of each other. Such motion has no appearance of rationality to it, though it does tend naturally to produce a clustering together at different points in space of the four elemental masses constituting the real — earth, air, fire and water.

2. The world as we know it was fashioned at a point in time which was the beginning point *of* time by an intelligent and providential Artisan (Δημιουργός) from the materials at his disposal — i.e., from the moving matter and space I have just mentioned. Since (as most Greeks of the time believed) our world is a living creature, the model the Artisan used to fashion it was the Form 'Living Creature'. And since the Demiurge was good, his pro-duct, the world, was good too. This good world, according to the ordinance of the Demiurge, will also, once fashioned, last forever.

3. A major inference we can draw from the above is that for Timaeus the world is dependent for its existence *as* this world on a cause other than itself. I mention this because, notoriously, from the beginning various commentators on the *Timaeus* have taken its account of the formation of the world to be a myth, and hence to be taken in some figurative way rather than literally.

> I happen to disagree strongly with them all on this (another paper…), but for present purposes the disagreement doesn't matter, since, whether our world was fashioned in time or not, Timaeus's account of its fashioning obliges us to believe that he held that it is in a *dependence relationship* with a cause other than itself. And it is that which is all-important. (In the *Philebus* the lead-interlocutor Socrates will re-affirm the point; what causes and what is caused cannot be conflated — one necessarily 'follows in the train' of the other, 26e–27a.)

Now that a lead-interlocutor in a dialogue has spoken on these matters, does Plato ever return to these topics in any other of the late dialogues, and how do his positions compare? He does return, and what he says seems to me worth looking at. In the cosmogonical myth of the *Statesman* the lead-interlocutor, a visitor from Elea, enlightens a young Socrates in much the way Parmenides had attempted to enlighten him in the *Parmenides*. And what he does is to repeat precisely what Timaeus had said about the world we know: it was 'brought into being', he says, by God (269c, 269d), whom he calls its 'maker and father' (273b), a phrase very reminiscent of Timaeus's description of him as the world's 'craftsman and father', and depends everlastingly on divine interventions at particular times for it to continue on in its everlasting course. And as in the *Timaeus*, the world's formation is not *ex nihilo*; it receives its bodily form, as the Visitor puts it, by being made to '*participate* in bodily form' (269d), a phrase which can only mean that — as in the *Timaeus* — matter was at hand for God to use for the purpose of effecting such participation, and thus fashioning the world as the physical living entity that it is. From which we can conclude with some confidence, I think, as we concluded in the case of Timaeus, that the Visitor believes, with Timaeus, that, whether the world of our experience was formed in time or not, it is still accurately describable as *dependent* on God for its existence and continuance in existence *as* that world.

Final critical statements on these matters are made by the lead interlocutor in the *Laws*, 'The Athenian'. Let us begin with some noticeable

changes — or apparent changes — from positions taken or assumed in earlier dialogues. If the sophist Protagoras had affirmed that 'man is the measure of all things', the Socrates of the *Republic* had clearly held that the Form of the Good is the measure of all things. Now we have a firm and strongly defended affirmation, by the Athenian in the *Laws*, that '*God* is the measure of all things'. What is happening? I myself would argue that Plato is now at a point where he feels that the Theory of Forms as transcendental particulars is no longer sustainable. His last imaginative use of it, after the criticisms of the *Parmenides*, was in the *Phaedrus*, where his lead-interlocutor, Socrates, puts forward the remarkable view — though admittedly in the context of a myth, that of a two-horse chariot and its charioteer — that it is proximity to the (transcendental) Forms which 'makes the gods divine' (249c). In the *Laws* we have no Form of the Good, and it is the gods — seen now as souls, of which the 'best one (ἀρίστη)' is God, in the sense of the supreme God — who serve as the basis of the real; any forms left in the system seem to be universals not perfect particulars.

Before I mention where I think this might be taking us, I need to point out that in the *Laws* the Athenian repeats from the *Phaedrus*, and defends at length, a new argument for the immortality of soul — any soul. It is now defined as 'self-moving motion', and the most powerful and most significant of these self-moving motions are the gods.

Where *Plato* is amidst all of these apparent changes of view might be thought too problematic even to investigate, and at least one commentator (G. Müller) was so discouraged that, but for the testimony of Aristotle, he would have excised the *Laws* from the Platonic corpus (Müller 1951: 190). But no such surgery from the canon is called for, I think. The transcendental Forms may be gone, but eternal, immortal soul remains, and in the *Laws* it is now affirmed with force that cosmic soul and all individual souls are, not created in time but eternally dependent for their existence upon a co-eternal but *in*dependent soul, that ἀρίστη ψυχή which is God (897c).

So on a critical new topic — the world and its cause — Plato's lead-interlocutors in the three dialogues which directly address the matter

are in fact in complete agreement: the world and its soul and all individual souls — now, in his most recent argument for immorality, shown to be eternal, not simply to continue on everlastingly once they have been created — are dependent for their existence and continuance in existence upon a cause other than themselves, whether or not that existence had a beginning in time. So this too is a view which I think we can confidently add to the list of positions which Plato himself firmly held, certainly from the time he first articulated them and possibly from a date even earlier.

The list is relatively short, but it contains some impressive and important items, I think, by any criterion. It is also simply my own list; someone with different interests in Plato from my own could no doubt add to it. Does it amount to a philosophical system? I doubt it; someone who chooses the dialogue form in which to express himself is not a systematiser, I think. But it does show deep and wide-ranging commitments on some critically important matters, and all have gone on to generate significant discussion since they were first articulated. But I should like to end with some final comments on the question with which I first began: where is *Plato* in his dialogues? Partly, it now transpires, in those arguments which are consistently proffered and defended by his lead-interlocutors across his writing lifetime. But mostly, I think, in what can only be called the 'drift' of a given dialogue. This drift is sensed usually after at least two careful readings of a dialogue, where to the question 'Where was *Plato* in all that?' one's overall response — sometimes a complex not to say confused response — is the equivalent of '*There* he is!' There he is, in the *Republic*, say, immersed in the search for a good definition of justice, and finding one in the argument of Socrates, but honest enough to admit — and *able* to admit, thanks to the dialogue form — that there is a bit of Thrasymachus in him too, and a bit of Cephalus, and a bit of Glaucon and Adeimantus, and all must have their say before he can finally announce 'Here I am! You have captured me as I always am, in mid-thought, always searching, searching, searching. The dialogue you have just read is my own inner dialogue, stopped for a brief while but in fact ever-continuing;

the *characters* in the dialogue you have just read are *arguments* I feel the need to keep investigating, sometimes coming to firm conclusions sometimes not. On the question of the subject of the present dialogue — justice — here I stand for the moment, driven by λόγος to the soundest position I can elaborate; where I shall stand on the same topic thirty years hence only the gods know. But I hope that, wherever it is, it will be firmly grounded in λόγος'.

A wonderful example of this Plato — Plato the searcher, who needs to write dialogues — and I shall end with this point — is to be found near the end of the *Laws* (898e–899a). Plato is now 80 or close to 80, and after a lifetime of writing about the nature of the soul, he asks, in a passage dealing with astral gods, how the soul of the *sun* relates to its body: does it push it from without, or pull it from within, or move it in some other strange and wonderful way? And he is clearly still unsure which… But we, the readers, know that he will continue to search, in the brief time left to him, and that — if he lives for a further year or two — he may write another dialogue on what he has either found or still failed to find. And we are full of admiration for his own, ever-searching soul.

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