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Source / Izvornik: **Croatian Journal of Philosophy, 2012, 12, 183 - 198**

Journal article, Published version

Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:261:051130>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-09-19**



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*The First Humans in Plato's Timaeus*¹

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Plato's Timaeus gives an account of the creation of the world and of human race. The text suggests that there was a first generation of human beings, and that they were all men. The paper raises difficulties for this traditional view, and considers an alternative, suggested in more recent literature, according to which humans of the first generation were sexually undifferentiated. The paper raises difficulties for the alternative view as well, and examines the third possibility, advocated by some ancient as well as modern interpreters, according to which there were no first humans, strictly speaking. Although the latter view avoids the pitfalls of the former two views, it crucially rests on a metaphorical reading of the creation story in the Timaeus.

Keywords: creation, myth, literal, metaphorical, mankind, origin, man, sexual differentiation, homosexual, reincarnation, Demiurge

The bulk of Plato's dialogue *Timaeus* forms a continuous speech delivered by a fictional philosopher, astronomer and statesman Timaeus of Locri. The speech "begins with the creation of the world and ends with the nature of humans" (27a5–6; cf. 90e2–3). The account of the nature of humans—their origin, composition, and purpose—is central to Timaeus' speech and it is foundational for Plato's larger project of construing and elaborating a comprehensive vision of justice, both individual and social, which occupies the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias*. The account of the nature of humans, however, does not form an uninterrupted exposition, but has two episodes. The first episode is found in the part of Timaeus speech in which he describes the works of intellect. In this episode Timaeus deals primarily with the rational soul and the events following its conjunction with the body. The second episode

¹ An early version of this paper was read in June 2006 at the *Timaeus* workshop organized by Filip Karfík in Prague, attended also by Maja and Filip Grgić. I am grateful to the participants who made comments are raised questions. I am especially grateful to Filip Karfík, István Bodnár, Thomas Johansen and an anonymous referee for *Ancient Philosophy* for their comments on later versions.

is found in the part of Timaeus' speech following a description of the structure of the physical world which is said to be a result of necessity, that is in the part describing the joint products of intellect and necessity. The focus of this episode is the body with which rational soul is conjoined, the structure, processes and states of the body. In this paper I shall not give a comprehensive treatment of the two episodes of the account of the nature of humans. Rather, I would like to look at a particular problem concerning the opening of the first episode, where the first generation of human beings is mentioned. And the problem is, very briefly, the following: were human beings of the first generation all men, were they sexually undifferentiated, or were there strictly speaking no first humans? Before I formulate and discuss the problem, however, I should say something about the context of the first episode, the creation of the four kinds of living beings.

1.

Having created the planets "to delimit and preserve the numbers of time" (38c6), the Demiurge went on to create other living beings of the immortal kind, notably the stars, the Earth and the other lesser gods. There were three more kinds, all of them mortal, which had to be created in order to make the universe resemble its paradigm, the Form of the living being. These three kinds were terrestrial animals ("the kind that has feet and lives on land"), birds ("the kind that has wings and travels in the air"), and aquatics ("the kind that lives in water").² To create the three mortal kinds, however, the Demiurge needed assistance of the lesser gods, for his own creations could not fall short of immortality. So he created the immortal component of the mortal living beings, their souls, whereas the lesser gods were instructed to create the component which makes them mortal, their bodies. "Weave what is mortal to what is immortal, fashion and generate living beings, make them grow by giving them food and receive them again when they perish."³

The Demiurge created souls from the leftovers of the ingredients from which he created the world soul. These leftovers were no longer entirely pure but "of a second and third grade of purity" (41d6), yet the ingredients are mixed in "roughly the same way" as in the case of the world soul. This was supposed to account for the fact that individual souls are much like the world soul, only less perfect. They would be essentially rational souls, consisting of the circle of the Same that grasps the Forms, and the circle of the Different that grasps sensible particulars. Now individual souls were created when the mixture was divided into as many bits as there were stars, and then each soul was assigned

² The plants may be regarded as the fourth mortal kind; cf. 77b1–c5. For an analysis of Plato's account of plants, see Skemp (1947).

³ 41d1–3. All translations are mine, mostly based on Zeyl's translation in Cooper (1997).

to one star. The stars seem to be the vehicles to which the souls were then said to be mounted for a guided tour in which the Demiurge showed to the souls the nature of the world and told them the “fated laws”. The expression “fated laws” (εἰμαρμένοι νόμοι) most probably refers to the account of the scheme of reincarnations of the souls, stretching from 41e3 to 42e4. This account receives further elaboration at 90e1–92c3.

Here is how the account starts:

γένεσις πρώτη μὲν ἔσοιτο τεταγμένη μία πᾶσιν, ἵνα μήτις ἐλαττοῖτο ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ, δέοι δὲ σπαρείσας αὐτάς εἰς τὰ προσήκοντα ἐκάσταις ἐκάστα ὄργανα χρόνων φῦναι ζῶων τὸ θεοσεβέστατον, διπλῆς δὲ οὐσῆς τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως, τὸ κρεῖττον τοιοῦτον εἶη γένος ὃ καὶ ἔπειτα κεκληῖσσιτο ἀνὴρ.

They would all be assigned one and the same initial generation, so that none would be disadvantaged by him <viz. the Demiurge>. Then he would sow the souls into the instruments of time, each into the one appropriate to it, where they were to grow into the most god-fearing of living beings, and, since humans have a twofold nature, the superior kind should be such as would from then on be called “man”. (41e3–42a3)

This is a striking passage which has received considerable attention by the commentators, ancient and contemporary alike. The emphasis is clearly on the Demiurge’s goodness. Or perhaps we should rather say that the emphasis is on his fairness as well as his goodness, since souls have *equal* starting positions as well as the *best* starting positions.⁴ These two features of the Demiurge are critical for the main part of my discussion. To appreciate the Demiurge’s fairness first, it is necessary to give a summary of the rest of the account in 41e3–42d2.

Once a soul is conjoined with a body, it experiences all sorts of violent emotions. If the soul manages to conquer these emotions, it will live its incarnate life justly, and it will be rewarded by returning to its allotted star. If the soul succumbs to the emotions, it will live unjustly, and it will be punished by being reincarnated in a woman’s body. And if, reincarnated in a woman’s body, it continues to live viciously, it will be reincarnated in the body of a beast whose nature reflects that particular vice. A soul is subject to reincarnations until it returns to its original condition of excellence, which implies that the course of reincarnations is reversible, as is made explicit at the very end of the dialogue, at 92c1–3.

This summary should suffice to show why fairness of the Demiurge required all souls to be incarnated for the first time in the same kind of body. Had they been incarnated in different kinds of bodies, those souls that would find themselves in the bodies of some lowly beasts, for instance, would be treated unfairly in comparison with those in the bodies of humans, for such souls would be disadvantaged in at least two respects: first, they would have to undergo a greater number of reincarnations until they could reach a position to rejoin their allotted

⁴ Perhaps both features can be related to the fact that the Demiurge is ἄφθονος, “so he wanted everything to become as much like himself as possible” (29e2–3).

star; second, they would find themselves in bodies in which it seems much more difficult, if not impossible, to exercise rationality. We learn from 91e6–92a2 that the heads of quadrupeds come in all sorts of irregular shapes which make them suitable for housing the souls whose circles have become defunct through lack of use. Surely in such bodies it would be quite difficult to bring the revolutions of the rational soul into order and to live rationally. Moreover, Plato insists that the heads of such beasts are closer to the ground, which means that they are turned away from the heavens. Being closer to the heavens and able to look at them, as we shall see presently, is important for rationality because the observation of regular motions of the planets and stars is, according to Plato, the most powerful reminder of the soul's own nature and incentive to behave rationally.

This brings us to the Demiurge's goodness in putting all souls in the best starting position. The best starting position is the human body, for two of its features in particular. The first feature is the round shape of the head. The lesser gods were instructed to imitate the Demiurge. He provided the world soul with a spherical body accommodating the two circles of the world soul, so the lesser gods provided the human body with a spherical head in which the two circles of the soul can preserve their natural orbits. The second feature is the erect posture. An erect body with the head mounted on the top, the head being sufficiently mobile and equipped with a pair of eyes, enables one to observe the heavens. Observing the motions of stars and planets is crucial for rationality because it allows one to develop the conceptual apparatus by means of which the causes of celestial motions are discovered, and the causes are the perfectly regular revolutions of the world soul's circles. With this discovery, one is able to imitate the world soul by bringing and keeping the circles of one's soul in as regular orbits as possible.⁵ Essentially, this means that the soul would be in control of the emotions and thus live its incarnate life rationally and justly.⁶ By putting all souls in human bodies in the first incarnation, then, the Demiurge maximizes the chances of the souls to live rationally and to return to their allotted stars.

However, what was the shape of these human bodies with which all souls in their first incarnation were supposed to be conjoined? What were the first humans really like, anatomically speaking? Plato's formulation can be, and actually has been, interpreted in different ways. According to one interpretation, the first humans were all of male sex. This interpretation can be attributed, I think, to Eduard Zeller (1889, 819–820) and Richard Archer-Hind (1888, 338) in the 19th century, and more recently to feminist authors such as Christine Allen (1975, 133) and Page Dubois (1988, 169 ff.). The late German expert on the reception of the *Timaeus* in antiquity, Matthias Baltes (1978, 119–121),

⁵ See 47a1–c4.

⁶ More about these two features can be found in Gregorić (2005).

expressly espoused this interpretation, and so did Branko Pavlović (1981, 48), the author of the introduction to the Serbian translation of the *Timaeus*.

A different interpretation was hinted at by George Grote (1888, 253), and endorsed by Alfred Taylor in his well-known monograph on Plato (1926; 1960, 460) and at greater length in his learned commentary on the *Timaeus* (1928, 258). More recently, it was advocated by Luc Brisson (1996, 55, 278), Gordon Campbell (2000, 159), and apparently by Gorazd Kocijančič (2004, 457 n. 447), the Slovenian editor and translator of Plato's complete works. According to that interpretation, the first humans were sexually undifferentiated. For instance, Taylor wrote:

In the story of *Timaeus* the first living creatures are all human and without sex-differences, the differentiation of the sexes and the infra-human species coming about later by a kind of "evolution by degeneration". This is all that is meant by saying that the first "birth" is to be one and alike for all. (Taylor 1928, 258)

There is yet another interpretation, maintained by Proclus in his commentary on the *Timaeus* (III.281.1–284.12, 294.1–17 Diehl) and adopted by Francis Cornford (1937, 145). It seems that William Guthrie (1978, 307) was also sympathetic to it. According to this interpretation, there were, strictly speaking, no first humans. This interpretation rests on the assumption that *Timaeus*' story of the creation of the world, souls and different kinds of living beings should not be taken literally, as suggesting that they had a beginning in time. Since there was none,

...male and female must always exist, and all that is meant is that every soul that is at any time incarnated for the first time, is incarnated in male form. (Cornford 1937, 145)

In order to decide which of these three interpretations is the correct one, or at any rate the least problematic one, it is necessary to assess the evidence for and cogency of each interpretation, which is what I would like to do in the following sections.

2.

The main evidence for the interpretation according to which the first humans were all men lies in two claims. The first is found in the passage quoted above, at 42a1–3. Plato says that the purpose of sowing the souls into the instruments of time, that is the Earth and the planets, is to grow human beings, in particular "the superior kind that should be such as would from then on be called 'man' (άνήρ)". The second claim comes a few lines down, where the Demiurge explains that the souls which fail to rule the emotions and live a happy life, "would change into a woman's nature in the second generation (εις γυναικός φύσιν εν τη δευτέρω γενέσει)" (42b5–6). This is repeated at 90e6–91a1, where Plato writes: "Those generated as men (των γενομένων άνδρών) who had been

cowardly and who had lived their lives unjustly were, according to our likely account, transformed into women in the second generation.”

These two claims seem to justify the view that the first humans in the *Timaeus* were all men. The Demiurge wanted all souls to have the best starting position, and that was the human body of the male sex. The human body of the female sex appears only in the second generation, as a punishment for those souls that have not exercised their rationality over their emotions and thus failed to live virtuously. In fact, at 90e6–91a1 we learn that reincarnation in the body of a woman is the result of a particular vice, namely cowardice, which is a character trait traditionally associated with women. For other vices the souls were punished by being reincarnated in the bodies of lower animals, where Plato wanted each vice to be reflected in the character trait traditionally associated with a particular kind of beast. For instance, Plato says at 91d6–e1 that the genus of birds came from men who were not bad (τῶν ἀκάκων ἀνδρῶν), and who took an interest in the heavens, but naively thought that the ultimate proofs in that domain are achieved by visual observation. It follows that women and all kinds of animals were created at the same time, for the purpose of accommodating the souls in the second generation according to the whole range of cognitive and moral failures in the first generation. And if women were created only in the second generation, the souls embodied in the first generation must have been all incarnated as men.

This interpretation seems to be confirmed by a passage in which Timaeus explains why human beings have nails (76d3–e6). The true reason, he says, is that the lesser gods were thinking of the future generations, “knowing that one day women and other beasts will come to be from men” (ὡς γάρ ποτε ἐξ ἀνδρῶν γυναῖκες καὶ τᾶλλα θηρία γενήσονται 76d8–e1).

The trouble with this interpretation, however, is Plato's account of sexual differentiation at 90e6–91d6. Having said that those who lived cowardly in the first generation were transformed into women in the second generation, Plato continues:

And it was at that time (κατ' ἐκείνον δὴ τὸν χρόνον) that the gods for this reason (διὰ ταῦτα) fashioned the desire for sexual union (τὸν τῆς συνουσίας ἔρωτα), constructing one ensouled living creature in us and another in women. (91a1–4)

This passage seems to imply quite clearly that there was no sexual desire in the first generation, since it was created only “at that time”, namely at the time when some souls had to be reincarnated as women, and “for this reason”, presumably because from that point on there were two sexes whose union had to be secured for reproduction.⁷ By itself, the lack of sexual desire does not seem to present a problem for

⁷ One might object that Plato explicitly attributes ἔρωτος to first men at 42a7. However, in this passage Plato seems to use the term in a wider sense, for desire in general; see below pp. 190–191.

the view that the first human beings were all men. An adherent of this view could reply that it is hardly surprising that there was no desire for sexual union in men of the first generation, since there were no women around to unite with in order to reproduce. However, the creation of sexual desire required certain physiological modifications in the male body.

At 91a4–b7 Plato explains that there is a continuous conduit into which liquid is taken into the body and through which it is discharged pressed by the air. This conduit starts from the mouth, goes through the lungs to the kidneys and the bladder. Admittedly, the conduit continues from the bladder to a structure through which unused liquid is discharged, although Plato does not explicitly mention this structure. Now the conduit is connected by a channel (συνέτηρσαν) with the continuous column of marrow that goes from the head along the neck and down through the spine. Since the marrow is the ensouled stuff, according to Timaeus, and since this channel provides it with a vent, the place of venting is now furnished with “life-giving desire for emission”, which is how the “desire for reproduction” (τοῦ γεννᾶν ἔρωσ) is created in men. A parallel account of the female reproductive organs, with a controversial description of the “wandering uterus”, is supplied at 91b7–d5.⁸

For our purpose it is important to observe that the physiological modification necessary for the creation of sexual desire in men—the channel connecting the conduit for liquid and the continuous column of marrow—seems to have been made only at the time and for the purpose of the second generation. If this channel did not exist in humans of the first generation, then their constitution prevented them from emitting semen and impregnating, which means that they were not male in the physiological or functional sense. This is a problem for the view that the first humans were all men.

There are two ways in which one might try to get round this problem. One could argue that they were all male in the morphological sense, for their bodies did not differ in outward appearance from the males of the second and subsequent generations who were able to emit semen and impregnate, and on that account they could legitimately be called “men”. It may be significant, however, that Plato does not mention the structure through which the unused liquid is discharged in his description of the physiological change necessary for the creation of sexual desire in men (91a4–6). At the risk of being too speculative, and assuming that Plato was not excessively prudish,⁹ it may be the case that Plato failed to mention this structure because he thought that in the first humans it was quite unlike the corresponding structure in men of later generations. And even if this structure was morphologically the same, certainly it was not physiologically the same, since in the first humans

⁸ For a discussion of Plato's account of the female reproductive organs see Adair (1995/96).

⁹ He explicitly mentions the privy parts of men (τὰ αἰδοῖα) at 91b5.

this structure did not have the double function of discharging liquid waste *and* emitting semen, so it remains questionable whether they could indeed be called “man” without a significant stretch of meaning.

In addition to the morphological sense, or independently of it, one could also argue that the first humans were all “men” in a psychological sense. That is, when Plato used the word “man” in this context, he did not wish to attribute certain anatomical features, but first and foremost certain character traits, such as courage and strength, which were traditionally regarded as typical of men and which, needless to say, carried positive value judgements. In short, a “man” is not necessarily a person of male sex, but a person of “manly character”. So the first humans may not have been men in the physiological or even in the morphological sense, but they were “men” in the psychological sense.

This brings us close to the second interpretation, the one according to which the first humans were sexually undifferentiated. The main evidence for this interpretation is the account of sexual differentiation at 91a1–d6, opening with the claim that sexual desire with the necessary physiological modifications was introduced at the time and for the purpose of the second generation. This claim is fundamental to the second interpretation and its proponents take it at face value.

One problem for this interpretation is generated by the passages supporting the first interpretation, where Timaeus explicitly mentions “men” in connection with the first generation. If the Demiurge, in his goodness, wanted to give the souls in the first generation the best starting position in terms of the kind of body with which they will be conjoined, and this is said to be the male kind of body, then it seems that the first humans were “men” strictly speaking, not some sexually undifferentiated beings. The advocates of the second interpretation can solve this problem by making the same manoeuvre that is open to the advocates of the first interpretation when confronted with the account of sexual differentiation at 91a1–d6: the first humans were “men” in a psychological sense, or perhaps even in a morphological sense, but certainly not in the physiological sense.

Another objection to the second interpretation was raised by Cornford (1937, 145 n. 1). He pointed out that desire ($\xi\rho\omega\varsigma$) is explicitly attributed to the first humans at 42a7, so it cannot be introduced only in the second generation. However, this objection is quite weak. At 42a3–b1 Timaeus explains what capacities are necessarily innate when souls are implanted into bodies which are of such a nature that they constantly exchange matter with their environment: first sensation ($\alpha\acute{\iota}\sigma\theta\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$) arising from strong affections, second $\xi\rho\omega\varsigma$ “mixed with pleasure and pain”, and then fear, spiritedness, etc. This indicates that $\xi\rho\omega\varsigma$ refers to desire in a very general sense, namely desire to get what is pleasant and to avoid what is painful.¹⁰ At 91a2 and b4, by contrast, the word $\xi\rho\omega\varsigma$ is qualified as \acute{o} τῆς συνουσίας and \acute{o} τοῦ γεννᾶν respective-

¹⁰ Cf. 69d4–6.

ly, thus specifying the sort of desire at hand. So, while desire generally speaking is no doubt attributed to human beings of the first generation, specifically sexual desire, one can argue, is introduced only in the second generation.

Apart from these two problems which appear to be soluble in one way or another, there is a more serious problem for the second interpretation. At 42b3–5 Plato says that those souls which would lead a good life throughout their given time in the first incarnation would return to their allotted stars. It seems, then, that one virtuous life in the first generation would guarantee the soul's return to its star. Taylor noted that this is inconsistent with the myth of the *Phaedrus* (249a3–256b4), where it is said that even the best men have to live a life of philosophy *three times over* before they can grow wings and depart from the cycle of reincarnations. More importantly, if all the souls that led virtuous lives in the first generation returned to their stars, whereas all the souls that failed to lead virtuous lives were reincarnated as women and animals of various sorts, it follows that all human beings in the second generation would be women. This unpalatable consequence was duly noted by Taylor:

If the men who were too good to be reborn as women all departed to their “stars”, the women of the second generation would have no mates, the elaborate arrangements for sexual propagation would be useless, and mankind would die out. We must suppose that a great many, if not all, of the men who live too well to be reincarnated as women are reborn many times in order to account for the “appearances”. (Taylor 1928, 261)

Taylor found a solution to this difficulty in the indefiniteness of the expression “the given time” (τὸν προσήκοντα χρόνον), which may mean more than one lifetime. That is to say, “the given time” is not the time assigned to a soul to spend incarnated in *one* body, but rather the time assigned to a soul to spend incarnated, be it in one, two or more bodies. As Taylor wrote (1928, 261): “We are not to suppose that the ‘due time’ is one and the same period for every man. It may be longer for some souls and shorter for others.”

So, in order to secure successful propagation of human species, the account of reincarnation in the *Timaeus* requires that we find a sufficient number of souls in the second generation reincarnated as men, along with a number of souls reincarnated as women for failing to live their former lives virtuously or bravely. Assuming, then, that there is a considerable number of souls in the second generation reincarnated as men, it is legitimate to wonder how did they live their lives in the previous incarnation, that is in the first generation. Presumably, they lived their lives justly and courageously, since otherwise they would have been reincarnated as women in the second generation. It may be the case that they had not lived such saintly or perfectly virtuous lives that earned them the absolution right away—if we wish to make room for a minority of souls that return to their allotted stars as soon as they depart from the body with which they were conjoined in the first gener-

ation—but we nevertheless have to admit that the souls reincarnated as men in the second generation led their previous lives well, certainly better than the souls which were reincarnated as women, let alone the souls which were reincarnated as animals. Let me explain why I think that this creates a serious problem for the second interpretation.

According to the second interpretation, as we have seen, the first humans were sexually undifferentiated. They did not have the structures necessary for reproductive processes and actions, and hence they did not have sexual desire. Now what happened to those of the first humans who spent their time leading a sufficiently virtuous life not to be reincarnated as women in the second generation? Presumably, they were reincarnated as men. But men in the second generation *did* have sexual desire and were equipped with fully functional reproductive apparatus, which Plato describes as “an animal that will not listen to reason, seeking to conquer everything with its frantic desires” (91b6–7). Surely it is much more difficult to lead a just and virtuous life if one is troubled by sexual desire than if one is spared of it. It follows that the first humans who spent their time leading virtuous lives, or at any rate sufficiently virtuous not to be reincarnated as women, found themselves in a considerably worse situation in the second generation. And that seems rather unjust.

I have mentioned the Demiurge’s fairness and goodness in setting up the “fated laws” of reincarnation. What I have not mentioned is the Demiurge’s justice. Plato pays special attention to this quality of the Demiurge when he says that the scheme of reincarnation is set up in order for the Demiurge “to exempt himself from responsibility for any of their subsequent vices” (42d2–4). The situation in which a soul finds itself in one generation is entirely the result of the way the soul lived its life in earlier incarnations. The account of the “fated laws” of reincarnation closes with the Demiurge’s instruction to the lesser gods to furnish the souls with mortal bodies and whatever else they needed, and

he gave them the task of ruling over these mortal living beings and of giving them the finest, the best possible guidance they could give, without being responsible for any of the evils that one might bring upon oneself. (42e1–4)

So the scheme of reincarnations is supposed to be perfectly just, such that a soul ends up in a better or worse situation in the next incarnation depending solely on the way it chose to live its incarnate life. However, justness of this scheme would be compromised if we had to suppose that the first humans were untroubled by sexual desire and that those who lived through their lives justly and virtuously got punished in the second generation by being reincarnated as men troubled by sexual desire—which is a considerably worse situation, certainly by Plato’s lights.

One could reply to this problem in the following way. If the first generation does not live well enough to return to the stars, yet lives well enough to avoid becoming women, justice in fact *requires* that that

they be punished for failing to live as well as they could, and living in the second generation as men troubled by sexual desire seems like an appropriate punishment. This would imply, then, that the scheme of reincarnations has an intermediate stage of being a man with sexual desire between the better stage of being a sexually undifferentiated human with no sexual desire and the worse stage of being a woman (also with sexual desire, of course). However, there is no independent textual evidence to support this three-stage view at the top of the scheme of reincarnations. More importantly, it seems that the best of these three stages occurs only at the beginning. That is, a man of the second or later generations who lives virtuously and manages to conquer his sexual desire will not be reincarnated in a body in which he will no longer suffer the burden of sexual desire; rather, he will either join his allotted star immediately or else be reborn again as a man with sexual desires who will have to complete the same feat of virtue twice over before being released to his star, if we should follow the story from the *Phaedrus*. Consequently, the stage of being a sexually undifferentiated human with no sexual desire has an awkward place in the scheme of reincarnations.

Perhaps it is better to reject the view that sexual differentiation was postponed until the second generation. What we should think instead is that only the *account* of sexual differentiation at 91a1–d6 is deferred until the account of the main features of the human body, including pathology, are complete. Cornford (1937, 145 n. 1) thinks that “the physical differences of the sexes are postponed to a sort of appendix at the end because all that will be said in the interval applies equally to men and women”. While he is right to claim that the account of sexual differentiation is postponed to a sort of appendix, the reason he adduces for this postponement is too quick, because in the interval, at 86c3–d2, we find a description of what happens when too much semen is accumulated in the body, which clearly applies only to men:

And when semen around the marrow becomes so copious and overflowing like a tree that bears more fruit than what is by nature appropriate, one is in a long series of bursts of pain, or of pleasures, in the area of his desires and their fruition.

This passage shows that Plato was thinking of sexual desire and the requisite physiological structures even before he provided an account of sexual differentiation at 91a1–d6.

3.

Having rejected the view that sexual differentiation is introduced only in the second generation, we have to reject the second interpretation according to which the first humans were sexually undifferentiated. At the same time, we have to reinstate the first interpretation according to which the first humans were all men, since the main problem for the first interpretation was precisely the view that sexual differentiation

occurs only in the second generation. Is there anything wrong, then, with the view that the first humans were all men in the ordinary sense, fully equipped with the requisite physiological structures and troubled by sexual desire?

What might be wrong with this view is that there were no women in the first generation, so there would be no point in having sexual desire and the requisite physiological apparatus. One might argue that Plato, who belonged to a culture in which homosexuality was normal and even salutary, the idea of an exclusively male world need not be found objectionable. Indeed, it may be found positively appealing, as some feminist critics have argued.¹¹ Or one might argue that Plato does think that sexual desire and sexual organs exist for the sake of procreation, and that the lesser gods implanted them in anticipation of their role in the future generations. However, Plato's description of sexual desire at 91a1–4 seems to suggest that sexual desire is implanted *at the same time* in men and in women.

There is another, more serious objection to the first interpretation. In fact, it is an objection to any interpretation which takes the story of creation literally and assumes that it is legitimate to talk about the first humans, be they men with sexual desire or sexually undifferentiated humans without sexual desire. This objection rests on Plato's account of the events following the conjunction of soul and body (42e5–44d2).

When a soul is united with the body, we are told, it is overwhelmed by digestive processes and sensations produced by encounters with external objects. This completely blocks the revolution of the soul's circle of the Same and shakes the orbit of the circle of the Different. "All these disturbances are no doubt the reason why today and at the beginning, whenever a soul is bound within a mortal body, it at first lacks intelligence" (44a7–b1). The newly generated human being has no intellect and cannot make correct judgements. The soul has no control of the body, so the human being cannot keep its body straight and has to move on all fours, and that "in a disorderly, random and irrational way" (43b1–2). The newly generated human being, in short, is disoriented and needy. And it requires considerable time for the processes of nourishment and growth to subside and for the revolutions of the circles of the soul to be restored to their natural courses, whereby the soul regains its control of the body and becomes rational to the extent that it is ready to receive the right sort of education leading to true knowledge.

This is usually, and I think quite correctly, interpreted as an account of the passage from infancy to early adulthood. And this account, I wish to argue, creates a serious problem for any interpretation that takes the story of creation literally. Namely, if there ever were first humans, presumably they all started their incarnate lives as infants. But infants are disoriented and needy living beings, and there were no

¹¹ Cf. Arthur (1983) and Dubois (1988).

adults to provide them with nourishment, protection and guidance. So how could the first humans survive past their earliest infancy?

I can envisage two ways in which one might try to tackle this objection. First, one might suggest that souls were united not with infant but with adult bodies in the first generation. Apart from the fact that this suggestion has no textual support, it does not seem to solve the problem. Plato's account indicates that it is not the union specifically with the body of an infant, but with the body as such that confounds the soul and renders the newly generated human being disoriented and needy. It is the processes that the body necessarily brings with it, notably digestion and sensation, that confound the soul. Although these processes are particularly vehement in infancy and subside later in life (44b1–2), they persist throughout one's embodied existence, and hence there is no reason to think that a soul united with an adult body would not be disoriented and needy. And even if we supposed, for the sake of argument, that some or all first humans were spared of this initial disorientation and neediness, we would end up with a problem similar to the one raised for the second interpretation. The souls that would live their first incarnate lives well would be reincarnated as men, and if they again lived their second incarnate lives well, presumably they would be reincarnated as male infants in the third generation, since humans of the third generation are the offspring of the men and women of the preceding generation. Now given that infancy is considered a deplorable state, it follows that those souls that lived well twice over would be punished by being reincarnated as infants, which would again undermine justness of the Demiurge and of his scheme of reincarnation.

Second, granted that the first humans had to be nourished, protected and guided in order to survive, one might argue that this task was performed by the lesser gods. Although this line of argument would solve the problem, it seems too far-fetched. The lesser gods were instructed by the Demiurge at 41d1–3 “to generate mortal living beings, to enable them to grow by providing them with nourishment, and to receive them back again when they perish”. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the lesser gods engage also in rearing individual mortal living beings.

4.

Having discussed the first two interpretations, let us now turn to the third one. According to the third interpretation, it is true that each individual soul is incarnated for the first time as a man, and then, depending on the way it lives its embodied life, it will be reincarnated in a suitable body on the next occasion. However, this does not imply that the first incarnation of all individual souls in the male human body occurs *at the same time*. As Cornford writes:

We need not understand that there were no women until the bad men of the

first generation began to die and to be reincarnated in female form, but only that a bad man will be reborn as a woman, a bad woman presumably as a beast. (Cornford 1937, 145)

On this view, the Earth has always been populated by men and women and all other kinds of mortal living beings. When an individual soul gets incarnated for the first time, it is united with the body of a male newborn in the normal course of human reproduction. And as the individual grows, surrounded with men and women alike, at some point in the course of his development he naturally starts to experience sexual desire and to engage in reproductive behaviour for which it is, of course, physiologically fully equipped. Thus the third interpretation avoids the problem for the first interpretation without being troubled by any of the problems for the second interpretation.

However, there are two worries for the third interpretation as well. The first problem has to do with the assumption that human beings, as well as the other mortal kinds, must have always existed. Given that the number of souls in the world is fixed, and granted that souls which live their incarnate lives virtuously several times over return to their allotted stars, the total number of mortal animals can only diminish over time. Indeed, after a sufficiently long period of time, all souls will be with their stars and there will be no mortal animals populating the Earth and the planets. This problem might be solved by introducing periodic cosmic cataclysms, such as the Stoic ἐκπύρωσις, after which the souls undergo a new cycle of incarnations. However, there is no evidence of this idea in the *Timaeus*, despite some attempts to connect the cataclysms with the completion of the Great Year (39d2–7).¹² Alternatively, one can suggest that just as the period of incarnated existence of each soul is limited,¹³ so is the period of its blessed existence among the stars. Although this suggestion is not explicitly supported by any of Plato's texts either, it seems rather innocuous.

The second problem is that the third interpretation goes against the letter of the *Timaeus*. As we have seen, the Demiurge is said to have created all souls by dividing the mixture into the same number of portions as there are stars. Having showed them the nature of the world and having told them the fated laws, he sowed them into the vehicles of time in order to grow mankind. The aorist of a large majority of verbs in this whole passage (e.g. διεἶλεν ψυχάς 41d8; σπαρείσας αὐτάς 41e4; φῶναι 42a1) suggests very strongly that they describe events that took place at a determinate point in the past. More importantly, Plato speaks of the creation of time itself, which took place simultaneously with the

¹² Cf. Zeller (1889, 811–812); Taylor (1928, 216–219); Cornford (1938, 117); Van der Waerden (1952). Partial catastrophes which periodically affect larger parts of population, envisaged at 22c1–e5 (cf. *Critias* 109d1–4, 111a6–b4; *Laws* III 676b9–c1, 677a4–6), cannot be evoked to solve the problem.

¹³ In the *Phaedrus* (248e5–249a5) Plato says that “no soul returns to the place from which it came for ten thousand years”, except for the soul of a true philosopher which might return after three thousand years.

creation of the heavens, “for before the heavens came to be, there were no days or nights, no months or years” (37e1–2). This rules out the possibility that all species of living beings have always existed, as the third interpretation proposes, since the creation of time sets a temporal limitation on the existence of the whole universe. Indeed, Timaeus explicitly raises the question whether the universe has always existed, and then resolutely rejects it:

...has it <viz. the whole universe> always existed, having no origin of becoming, or was it generated, taking its start from some origin? It was generated. For it is both visible and tangible and it has a body. All such things are perceptible, and perceptible things, grasped by opinion together with perception, were shown to become and to be generable. (28b6–c2)

This second problem stands or falls with one's general approach to the entire dialogue, which is itself a perennial subject of controversy.¹⁴ If one reads the *Timaeus* literally, as an account of the creation of the world—as Aristotle and Plutarch read it—then the second problem for the third interpretation arises and it appears to be insurmountable. Thus the third interpretation is not an option for literalist readers of the *Timaeus*, and they have to choose between the first two interpretations. I hope to have shown that the first interpretation is slightly more promising, though by no means devoid of problems.

On the other hand, if one reads the *Timaeus* metaphorically, as an account of the world which, due to its mythical form, proceeds *as if* the world were created—which is how a majority of Platonists, from Xenocrates to Proclus, have read it—then one would naturally opt for the third interpretation. With the metaphorical reading of the *Timaeus*, which seems more attractive on independent philosophical grounds, the second problem for the third interpretation does not arise at all, whereas the first problem can be solved by setting a limit to the overall duration of souls' existence among the stars.

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¹⁴ A brief overview of the controversy, with some bibliography, can be found in Guthrie (1978, 302–305). A detailed study of the controversy is provided by Baltes (1976) and (1978).

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