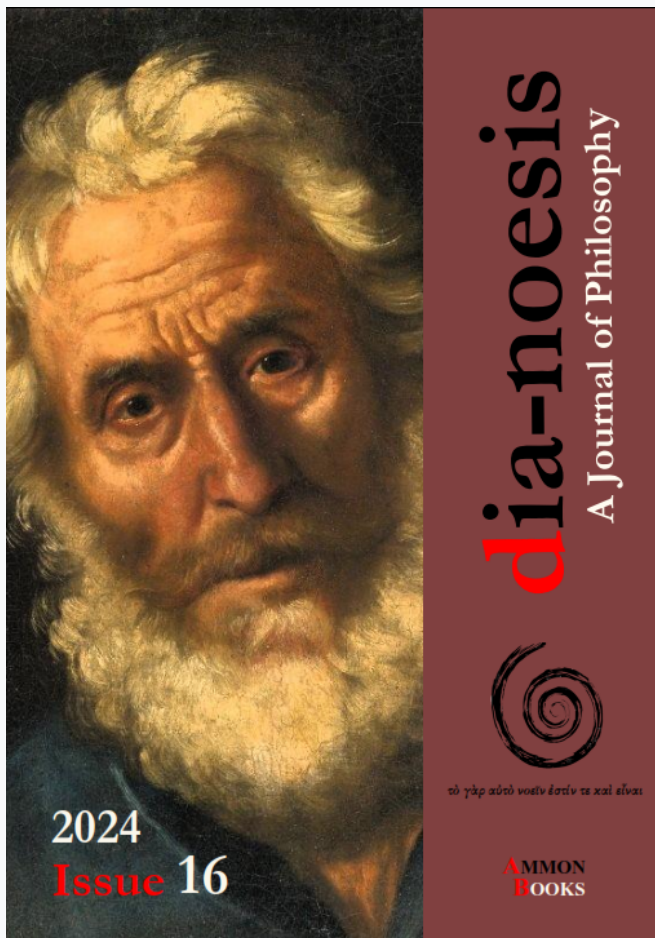


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Between Chaos and Cosmic Order: The Ambivalent Disposition of Matter in Middle Platonism

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Abstract

In *Timaeus* (30a ff.), Plato presents matter as a passive principle, inherently predisposed to disorder, subject to mechanistic necessity, and apparently devoid of any volition or predisposition towards the Demiurge. This cosmological framework, however, is not uniformly embraced by Middle Platonists. Instead, three divergent conceptions of matter emerge: one aligned with Plato's notion of passivity, another in which matter resists the Demiurge with malevolence, and a third where it actively seeks union with the intelligible realm. This study pursues two primary objectives: first, to explore the ontological status and disposition of matter in relation to the intelligible within Middle Platonic thought; second, to elucidate why matter assumes such antithetical attributes.

Keywords: Middle Platonism; Demiurge; matter; Ploutarch; Numenius; Alcinous; Apuleius;

I

In the rich metaphysical landscape of Middle Platonism — spanning from the 1st century BCE to the emergence of Plotinus in the 3rd century CE— the triadic schema of three principles remains foundational: the divine, the paradigmatic Forms, and matter¹. Following the narrative of Plato’s *Timaeus*, the dialogue that exerted the most profound influence on Middle Platonic thought², the Demiurge is portrayed as the active agent who exerts formative influence upon matter, modeling it after the Platonic Ideas and, thus, enabling the realms of the intelligible and the sensible to engage in interaction. As a consequence of this demiurgic intervention initiated solely by the divine craftsman, disorder yields to order, and primordial chaos is supplanted by cosmic harmony, culminating in the creation of the sensible cosmos. Within this cosmological condition, matter is portrayed as a passive substrate, manipulated by the Demiurge to serve his teleological purpose. Yet, how consistent is this Middle Platonic interpretation —particularly with regard to matter’s passivity and receptivity— with Plato’s original depiction in the *Timaeus*? A closer examination of Middle Platonic sources reveals deviations from the original Platonic framework by certain philosophers. While the dominant view maintains matter’s passivity, an alternative interpretation emerges, portraying matter not merely as a passive recipient but as

¹ For the ‘standard’ view of the three principles in Middle Platonism, see Dörrie H. – Baltes M., 1996; Dodds E. R. *et al.* (eds.), 1960: 205-210. Sometimes the Middle Platonic norm of the three principles can be presented more simplistically, including only two principles: God and matter. This occurs when the Ideas are considered as residing within the mind of the first principle, i.e., God, rather than as a separate ontological starting point, see Dillon J., 2019: 35-49. Alternatively, the schema of three principles is sometimes expanded to include the World Soul, thus forming a four-principle structure, see Plut. *De gen.* 591B.

² The survival and the immense influence of the *Timaeus*, even for many centuries after its writing, is unparalleled among Platonic dialogues, mainly because its Latin translation was the only known work of Plato in the West until the 13th century. For the influence of the *Timaeus* on Middle Platonists as well as on philosophers of later periods, see Neschke-Hentschke A., 2000; Leinkauf T. – Steel C. (eds.), 2005.

imbued with a form of volition. This volition manifests in two opposing modalities: at times, matter actively resists the Demiurge, exhibiting an active malevolence; at others, it expresses an ardent desire for union with the intelligible, initiating this alignment through its own impetus.

This paper does not aim to provide an exhaustive account of all conceivable modes of interaction between the material and noetic realms, which are varied and at times exceedingly inventive within Middle Platonism. Rather, this inquiry is focused on addressing two key questions: first, where and how does matter, in the works of Middle Platonists, exhibit a divergent disposition so as to approach the Demiurge—and, by extension, the intelligible—when contrasted with Plato’s original portrayal? Second, how can we account for the starkly divergent, and at times diametrically opposed, positions found within Middle Platonic thought concerning the ontological character of matter? Through a detailed examination of *Timaeus*, this study will seek to identify the foundations upon which these interpretations rest, and further, whether, despite their Platonic origins, other philosophical or external influences contributed to their development.

II

It is fortunate that, among the extensive literature of the Middle Platonism, at least two works have survived that served as introductory manuals to the basic tenets of Platonism: Alcinous’ *Didaskalikos* and Apuleius’ *De Platone et eius dogmate*. Their popularity and pedagogical nature suggest that the views presented in these texts were widely accepted doctrines among Platonists, regarding the central points of Platonic philosophy, particularly concerning the disposition of matter towards the craftsman during the act of creation. In the *Didaskalikos*, matter, which is identified with the concept of *chora* (χώρα), is characterized as entirely passive and receptive³. Similarly, in *De Platone et eius dogmate*, Apuleius

³ Alcin. *Didask.* 8.3. The identification of matter with the Platonic *χώρα* or *ὑποδοχή* is prevalent in Middle Platonism; its origin can be traced back to Aristotle *Ph.* 4, 2, 209b11-16.

asserts that matter is capable of receiving forms and being shaped and molded, and furthermore, that it is the divine creator who fully imposes form upon it⁴. From both cases we deduce that matter is a wholly passive principle, entirely subject to the action of the active agent of the noetic realm.

Among the more specialized metaphysical treatises of the period, several are authored by Plutarch and offer deeper explorations of Platonic thought. Plato's *Timaeus* is the primary dialogue from which Plutarch derives his philosophical positions, and it serves as the foundation for a variety of his treatises, such as *De animae procreatione in Timaeo*, which examines the genesis and structure of the World Soul, and the *Quaestiones Platonicae*, a collection of ten treatises that address various individual themes of Platonic philosophy⁵. In the fourth of these *Quaestiones Platonicae*, which explores the relationship between body and soul, Plutarch contends that the soul without intellect and the formless body preexisted eternally, having neither origin nor beginning. Moreover, it is only after the soul acquires intellect that it begins to transform matter, replacing its chaotic movements with its own orderly motions, thereby producing the body of the cosmos⁶. In this case, it is not the cosmic demiurge but another intellectual principle, the soul, that shapes matter and brings forth an orderly, compliant body. Even here, matter remains a consistently passive principle, offering no resistance to the activity of the intelligent agent. The passivity, indifference, and neutrality of matter are traits that persist in *De animae procreatione in Timaeo*, where, in his examination of *Timaeus* 35a-36b, Plutarch portrays matter as utterly devoid of any inherent qualities or power and, thus, also without any capacity for desire⁷.

A markedly different perspective is presented by L. Mestrius Autobulus of Chaironeia in Plutarch's *Quaestiones Convivales*

⁴ Apul. *Plat.* V, 191-192.

⁵ *Quaestiones Platonicae* II, IV, V, VII and VIII concern the *Timaeus*; III and IX deal with positions from the *Republic*, I address issues from the *Theaetetus*, VI from the *Phaedrus* and X from the *Sophist*.

⁶ Plut. *Quaest. Plat.* 1003A.

⁷ Plut. *De an. procr.* 1014F, 1015D.

⁸. The significance of this testimony regarding matter's disposition lies in the fact that it is described not only as resistant to the imposition of geometric order and form but as actively struggling against being constrained by them. Matter is portrayed as violently opposing the imposition of determinate form, while reason compels it into submission. In a similar vein, in Plutarch's *De defectu oraculorum*, matter is depicted as a malevolent force that actively opposes the benevolent cause⁹. After characterizing matter as a state of privation, Plutarch asserts specifically that it possesses the capacity to destroy and dissolve what is created by the stronger, benevolent cause, that is, the intelligible principle. This notion of matter as inherently malevolent and thus as the cause of evil is also reflected in the thought of another Middle Platonist, Numenius. As reported by Calcidius in his *Commentary on the Timaeus*¹⁰:

Igitur Pythagoras quoque, inquit Numenius, fluidam et sine qualitate silvam esse censet nec tamen, ut Stoici, naturae mediae interque bonorum malorumque viciniam, quod genus illi appellant indifferens, sed plane noxiam. Deum quippe esse – ut etiam Platoni videtur – initium et causam bonorum, silvam malorum, at vero quod ex specie silvaeque sit, indifferens, non ergo silvam, sed mundum ex speciei bonitate silvaeque malitia temperatum; denique ex providentia et necessitate progenitum veterum theologorum scitis haberi.

From this passage, we see that, for Numenius, matter is indeed a positively evil force, representing the opposing pole to the intelligible and divine goodness, in contrast to the Stoics, who regarded matter as a neutral nature, intermediate between good and evil (what they termed “indifferent”). Furthermore, it is implied that, if divine providence exists, so too must evil, since matter exists and is imbued with evil. And if the world is fashioned from matter, it must have been made from

⁸ Autob. fr. 6 (= Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 8, 2, 3-4). For his philosophical personality, see Lakmann M.-L., 2017: 80-82.

⁹ Plut. *De def. or.* 414D.

¹⁰ Numen. fr. 52.

something that inherently possesses malevolent tendencies¹¹. Thus, Numenius advances positing that not only does matter resist the good but also that it is ontologically the source of evil in the world, a *malorum fons*¹².

In stark contrast to these interpretations is the view that matter desires the good and order, possessing an innate inclination towards it¹³. Through the cosmology of the *Timaeus*, Plutarch in his *De Iside et Osiride* attempts to interpret various facets of Egyptian mythology. In this work the Demiurge is identified with the Egyptian god Osiris, while matter is symbolized by the goddess Isis¹⁴, who is presented not as indifferent or evil but rather as possessing an intrinsic inclination towards the good and with a disposition to approach it. Thus, Isis-matter is described as follows¹⁵:

ἡ γὰρ Ἴσις [...] ἔχει δὲ σύμφυτον ἔρωτα τοῦ πρώτου καὶ κυριωτάτου πάντων, ὃ τὰγαθῶ ταυτόν ἐστι κάκεινο ποθεῖ καὶ διώκει· τὴν δ' ἐκ τοῦ κακοῦ φεύγει καὶ διωθεῖται μοῖραν, ἀμφοῖν μὲν οὖσα χώρα καὶ ὕλη, ῥέπουσα δ' αἰεὶ πρὸς τὸ βέλτιον ἐξ ἑαυτῆς καὶ παρέχουσα γεννᾶν ἐκείνω καὶ κατασπείρειν εἰς ἑαυτὴν ἀπορροὰς καὶ ὁμοιότητος, αἷς χαίρει καὶ γέγηθε κυῖσκομένη καὶ ὑποπιμπλαμένη τῶν

¹¹ Numen. fr. 52 (297). Numenius' dualism is also reflected in his psychological theories. Porphyry mentions that Numenius was among the philosophers who believed in the existence of two souls, one rational and one irrational, as opposed to those who held that the soul was singular but with many parts, see Numen. fr. 44. The two souls of humans, the good and the bad, correspond to the two souls of the world, see also Numen. fr. 52.60-62.

¹² Numen. fr. 52.63-66.

¹³ The concept of matter that desires order does not appear for the first time with Plutarch, but originates from earlier periods, already present in the Pre-Socratics, cf. Empedocles, 31B18 Diels – Kranz (= Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 370D).

¹⁴ In this work, Isis corresponds both to matter and to the Receptacle of the *Timaeus*. Indicative of this attribution are the names given to Isis as the female principle of nature (τὸ τῆς φύσεως θῆλυ), the universal receptacle (πανδεχῆς), and the nurse (τιθήνη), see Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 372E-F. According to O'Brien C. S., 2015: 99, there is a difference compared to the Pl. *Ti.* 49a-b and 51a, where the Receptacle is defined as the place in which creation occurs, rather than the material out of which it occurs.

¹⁵ Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 372E-F.

γενέσεων. εἰκὼν γὰρ ἐστὶν οὐσίας ἐν ὕλῃ γένεσις καὶ μίμημα τοῦ ὄντος τὸ γιγνόμενον.

Here, Plutarch elaborates on the notion that matter transcends the classification of a mere passive and inert principle; rather, it possesses an erotic longing for the intelligible realm. The concept of eros (ἔρως) is emphasized, with matter portrayed as yearning for the Forms and the intelligible. Isis, as the personification of matter, is depicted as passionately in love with the highest and most supreme of all things, the Good, which she desires and diligently strives to attain. She is represented as actively seeking the intelligible while simultaneously avoiding and distancing herself from evil, persistently inclining towards the better and willingly offering herself to it¹⁶. In addition to desire, this passage accentuates another intrinsic characteristic of matter: its perpetual inclination en route for the superior principle.

A distant echo of the allegory of matter-Isis' desire for the intelligible can be observed in one of Plutarch's later works, *Amatorius*. Although the text centers on the worldly romantic endeavors of the wealthy, respected widow Ismenodora and a young man named Bacchon, and the ensuing discussions about their potential union, the text is imbued with philosophical undertones¹⁷. However, a crucial distinction from *De Iside et Osiride* lies in the reciprocal nature of desire: both the intelligible-divine principle yearns for matter, and matter reciprocates this desire for the Divine. As Plutarch mentions, *the earth, which is the mother of all human beings, animals, and the cause of the generation of plants, will eventually disappear and be completely obliterated when the ardent desire or passion of the god for matter ceases and when matter itself no longer yearns for the principle and motion it receives from the Divine*¹⁸. Thus, here both the divine and matter are engaged in a mutual desire.

Given these contrasting portrayals of matter's disposition towards the intelligible across various metaphysical structures

¹⁶ Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 372E-373C, 374F, 383A.

¹⁷ The tradition of works themed around love has deep roots in Greek literature, cf. Pl. *Symp.* and *Phdr.*; Xen. *Symp.*; Ps.-Dem. *Erot.*

¹⁸ Plut. *Amat.* 770A-B.

in Middle Platonism, one must consider why such divergent interpretations arise. This inquiry becomes even more intricate when recognizing that these contradictory positions can sometimes coexist within the same author, as exemplified by Plutarch. To address this complexity, it is imperative to commence with an examination of the *Timaeus*.

III

Plato's *Timaeus* was a work of pivotal importance for the Middle Platonists, serving not only as a foundational text for interpreting Plato's cosmology but also as a key resource in the development of their own philosophical theories. However, despite its significance, the Middle Platonists did not always adhere faithfully to its original spirit, especially regarding the nature of matter. Among the three types of causal explanations presented in the cosmological myth of the *Timaeus*—to wit, teleological, mechanistic, and a synthesis of both—the chaotic motion of pre-cosmic matter, namely the four primary elements, is associated with the mechanistic causality. In *Timaeus*, 30a and subsequent passages, matter is not depicted as entirely inert; rather, it is portrayed as governed by its own internal necessities and laws, thereby offering some resistance to the Demiurge. Nevertheless, there is no clear indication that matter possesses any volition or intentionality towards the Demiurge.

To better understand the implications of this portrayal, it is necessary to delve deeper into the characteristics ascribed to matter within its original milieu. Plato, through his methodical examination of nature's elemental components and the process of cosmic creation, conceptualizes the world as a work of art. The Demiurge's role is framed within a creative process that presupposes both a benevolent cause and a material substrate¹⁹. The Demiurge, identified with the benevolent

¹⁹ Plato attributes the role of the demiurgic cause to the good god, who serves as the creator of the world. The choice of the profession of craftsman may initially seem odd, given the negative or even derogatory connotations the word could have had in Athens at the time. Plato himself placed artisans in the third class of his ideal Republic. In the *Timaeus*, yet, the

cause, is tasked with imparting form to the body of the cosmos and constructing the World Soul. His ultimate aim is to produce the best possible creation, as his initiative is driven by his inherent goodness²⁰.

The act of cosmic creation does not occur *ex nihilo*; instead, the craftsman imparts form upon a pre-existing material substrate, organizing it according to the eternal Ideas or Forms. His intervention in this chaotic material involves imposing order based on the optimal Paradigm, namely the Platonic Idea of the Living Creature²¹. Plato vividly illustrates this process by likening the Demiurge to a craftsman: just as a mortal artisan works with available materials and follows a predetermined design, so too does the divine craftsman act on a cosmic scale. The Demiurge fashions the body of the cosmos by utilizing the pre-existing materials of the four primordial elements (fire, water, earth, and air) and then proceeds to

creator is presented primarily as an ‘artist’, see Vlastos G., 1975: 26-27. The concept of the creator, although not as extensively analyzed as in the *Timaeus*, also appears in other Platonic dialogues, cf. *Soph.* 265a-265d, *Plt.* 268d-274e and *Phlb.* 23c-27c. For a detailed discussion of Plato’s use of the term, see O’Brien C. S., 2015: 19-24. On the various qualities that Plato attributes to the god of the *Timaeus*, such as potter, carpenter, wax modeler, metallurgist, see Brisson L., 1974: 35 ff. In modern research, various positions have been proposed regarding what exactly the Platonic Creator represents: a central view holds that the Demiurge should be seen as a mythical representation of the Paradigm, see Algra K. *et al.*, 1996: 82. In the same direction, the Demiurge can be understood as the dynamic/creative function of the Paradigm within the Platonic universe, see Napolitano Valditara L. M. (ed.), 2007: 156-163. Other theories speak of identifying the Demiurge with the World Soul, see Taylor A. E., 1928: 71-82, or as an aspect of the World Soul, see Bury R.G., 1929, or as a representation of the mind, which is inseparable from the World Soul and the world, see Cornford F., 1937. Sometimes the Demiurge is identified with the *nous*, the rational cause, which is part of the World Soul, see Cherniss H., 1944: 605-607. Finally, there is also the view of the cosmic demiurge as *nous* but distinct from the World Soul, see Hackforth R., “Plato’s Theism”, *The Classical Quarterly*, 30: 1, 1936, pp. 4-9; Guthrie W. K. C., 1978; Menn S. P., 1995; Brodie S., 2012; Vázquez D. – Ross A. (eds.), 2022: 44-77.

²⁰ *Pl. Ti.* 29e.

²¹ *Pl. Ti.* 30a ff. For Plato, the act of creation does not constitute *creatio ex nihilo*; rather, it signifies the imposition of order upon a pre-existing substratum, see Allen R. E. (ed.), 1965: 401-419, especially 404-406.

create the celestial bodies, the World Soul, the souls of the stars, and the immortal part of the human soul²². Central to the Demiurge's creative will is his goodness, which serves as the driving force behind his efforts²³:

βουληθείς γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ἀγαθὰ μὲν πάντα, φλαῦρον δὲ μηδὲν εἶναι κατὰ δύναμιν, οὕτω δὴ πᾶν ὅσον ἦν ὄρατὸν παραλαβὼν οὐχ ἡσυχίαν ἄγον ἀλλὰ κινούμενον πλημμυλῶς καὶ ἀτάκτως, εἰς τάξιν αὐτὸ ἤγαγεν ἐκ τῆς ἀταξίας, ἡγησάμενος ἐκείνου τούτου πάντως ἄμεινον.

The transformation undergone by the primordial material at the hands of the creator-god results in chaos giving way to order, and by imparting geometric form to the primal material, the Demiurge emerges as the final cause of the cosmos' creation²⁴.

The attributes that Plato ascribes to the primordial material are multifaceted. These four elemental substances are indeed visible (30a), but lack internal symmetry (69b) and are inherently imperfect (53a-b). Their motion occurs without rhythm or order (30a) and is devoid of proportion precision and symmetry (56c, 69b). Governed by necessity and contingent causes (68e), they serve as secondary, auxiliary causes in the process of the world's creation; causes that Plato categorizes as necessary (46d-e)²⁵. If this material exhibits any

²² Pl. *Ti.* 31b-32b, 40a ff. On the necessity of the creator-god in the Platonic thought, see Johansen T. K., "Why the Cosmos Needs a Craftsman: Plato, *Timaeus* 27d5-29b1", *Phronesis*, 59:4, 2014, pp. 297-320.

²³ Pl. *Ti.* 30a. Plato does not use the term ὄλη in the *Timaeus*; this came later, see Arist. *Ph.* 4, 2 209b11-16 ff. In this passage, Plato refers to the material substratum as "all that was visible" (πᾶν ὅσον ἦν ὄρατὸν).

²⁴ Without disorder, order cannot exist; thus, disorder must be considered as a necessary and structural element of Platonic cosmology; a factor that, along with order, both contribute to cosmic balance, see Maso S., "Providential Disorder in Plato's *Timaeus*?", *Peitho. Examina Antiqua*, 9: 1, 2018, pp. 47 ff.

²⁵ The importance of co-causes in Plato's cosmology is evident from the meticulous analysis of the works of Necessity, the forces governing them, and their natural properties. See Pl. *Ti.* 48 ff. However, it has been argued that Plato avoids, perhaps deliberately, giving a clear answer to the question of what exactly constitutes pre-cosmic matter, resorting to a purely idealistic abstraction, see Tzamalikos P., "The Concept of Ὑλη (Matter) in Plato's

resistance to the Demiurge's actions, such resistance is dictated by its intrinsic nature. The disorderly movement of primordial chaos is not the result of a rational or primary cause; rather, it is a purely physical phenomenon, as the four elemental bodies move in an automatic and mechanistic manner, a condition attributed to the *ἀνωμαλότης*, id est the irregularity of the material medium²⁶. After elucidating the disorderly nature of these movements, Plato introduces the Demiurge, who intervenes by imposing proportion upon the essence of these elements. The Demiurge comprehends the natural tendencies of his material and utilizes them accordingly²⁷; he neither forces them into submission nor acts against their nature, but rather collaborates with Necessity through persuasive means. A skilled craftsman, after all, understands what can be created with specific materials and judiciously selects them for his purpose²⁸. Necessity, characterized as the erratic cause (*πλανωμένη αἰτία*), and its operations pertain to the entirety of mechanical interactions within nature; interactions that transpire without any teleological intent²⁹. Thus, Necessity personifies contingent causes, signifying a blind, mechanistic form of causality.

Nevertheless, the absence of intentionality in the works of Necessity does not connote malevolence. On the contrary, the Demiurge collaborates closely with Necessity, leveraging the mechanistic causality of the material realm to attain the best possible result. Nowhere in the *Timaeus* does it suggest that

Timaeus", *Philosophia. Yearbook of the Research Center for Greek Philosophy at the Academy of Athens*, 27-28, 1997/1998, pp. 131-141.

²⁶ For the *ἀνωμαλότης* see Pl. *Ti.* 58c, 59a, 63e. The common Platonic injunction, to pursue intelligent causes as the first and the inanimate as the second ones, is valid only for the created world. This injunction is no valid while examining the precosmic chaos, simply because the intelligent causes cannot be as "the first", in an area which they do not exist, see Allen R. E. (ed.), 1965: 418.

²⁷ Pl. *Ti.* 30b-32c.

²⁸ Persuasion, as Plato refers to it as the means by which the divine creator manages matter, implies that compulsion is something that is excluded. For a detailed analysis of the concept of the Creator's persuasion, see Morrow G. R., "Necessity and Persuasion in Plato's *Timaeus*", *The Philosophical Review*, 59: 2, 1950, pp. 147-163.

²⁹ For the treatment of Necessity, see Pl. *Ti.* 47e-53c.

primordial chaos is inherently evil; it merely represents the result of a deficiency of goodness, a condition that ceases when the Demiurge, through persuasion, brings order out of necessity. In this manner, the mechanistic causality of *Timaeus*' Necessity is subsequently succeeded by the teleological causality of Nous. It is, rather, the personality of the Demiurge that is imbued with a sense of desire: he is benevolent and, as such, harbors no envy for anything; moreover, he desires order and persuades Necessity to cooperate for the better (*ἐπί το βέλτιστον*)³⁰. In Plato's exposition, the Demiurge thus symbolizes a benevolent cause that exists independently of the natural world; he acts upon it, shaping it, yet remains unaffected by it³¹.

IV

Plato's mechanistic causality in the *Timaeus* underscores the passive and neutral nature of matter in relation to the intelligible principle. This interpretation is mirrored in the principal introductory texts of Middle Platonism, such as Alcinous' *Didascalicus* and Apuleius' *De Platone et eius dogmate*, as well as in more specialized metaphysical treatises like Plutarch's *De animae procreatione in Timaeo*. Consequently, even though *Timaeus*' matter in its primordial state, as an operation of Necessity, manifests an inherent resistance to any imposition of order upon it through persuasion, this resistance does not reveal a willful lack of desire, an inherent malevolence, or an explicit antipathy. Nor can this resistance be construed as a deliberate act of malice *per se*. In fact, in Plato's cosmogony, evil emerges only with the advent of the lower gods and, ultimately, with the creation of humankind. Malevolence is a property that, in the Platonic system, is attributed primarily to the human soul, particularly when it is inevitably bound to the body, thereby losing its original alignment with the goodness of its Paradigm. Hence, humans become susceptible to the turbulent stimuli of the

³⁰ Pl. *Ti.* 29e-30a, 48a.

³¹ Vlastos G.,1975: 25.

passions —love, fear, anger, and other bodily affections³². Both in the *Timaeus* and across Plato’s corpus, evil is more aptly conceptualized through the perspective of cosmology as an absence of the Good rather than as an energetic, Manichean-type evil force, actively opposing or subverting the Good. Evil, in this context, means primarily the absence of cosmic order and teleology. Much as in the *Timaeus*, so in the *Statesman*, another of Plato’s cosmological myths, evil is interpreted as the privation of the benevolent cause, which in turn precipitates a return to chaos and disorder within the cosmos³³. Consequently, the notion advanced by L. Mestrius Autobulus in Plutarch’s *Quaestiones Convivales*, that matter violently opposes the intelligible, as well as the broader view, articulated by Numenius and also by Plutarch mainly in *De defectu oraculorum*, that matter is fundamentally malevolent, demand a more nuanced and compelling explanation for the manifestation of evil³⁴.

Plutarch staunchly advocated for a literal reading of the cosmogony presented in the *Timaeus*. In doing so, he interpreted the primordial state of the cosmos not as a mere logical possibility but as a literal pre-cosmic condition, attributing the chaotic movements of matter to a malevolent soul. As Proclus recounts in his *Commentary on the Timaeus*³⁵:

³² Pl. *Ti.* 42a-b. For the discussion on the various physiological and social causes of human badness in the *Timaeus*, see Jorgenson C. *et al.*, 2021: 259-273.

³³ In Plato’s *Statesman* (*Plt.* 269c-273b), according to the myth, a god gives life and wisdom to a pre-existing material body governed by disorder. However, at intervals, the direction of the created world’s rotation reverses, resulting in a transition from the period of divine care to the period of abandonment. The negative period is due to the temporary absence of the good cause and not to some supernatural malevolent force. In essence, matter regains its original characteristic of disorder, the “τῆς παλαιᾶς ἀναρμοστίας πάθος” i.e., the ancient condition of disorder. Nonetheless, this account concerns a theoretical possibility. For more on the subject, see Mohr R. D., “Disorderly Motion in Plato’s ‘Statesman’”, *Phoenix*, 35: 3, 1981, pp. 199-215.

³⁴ For the problem of evil in the Platonic tradition, see Merlini F. – Bernardini R. (eds.), 2017: 69-74.

³⁵ Attic. fr. 23 (=Procl. *In Ti.* 381, 26-382, 12 Diehl).

Οἱ μὲν οὖν περὶ Πλούταρχον τὸν Χαιρωνέα καὶ Ἀττικὸν λιπαρῶς ἀντέχονται τούτων τῶν ῥημάτων ὡς τὴν ἀπὸ χρόνου τῷ κόσμῳ γένεσιν αὐτοῖς μαρτυρούντων καὶ δὴ καὶ φασὶ προεῖναι μὲν τὴν ἀκόσμητον ὕλην πρὸ τῆς γενέσεως, προεῖναι δὲ καὶ τὴν κακεργέτιν ψυχὴν τὴν τοῦτο κινουῦσαν τὸ πλημμελές· πόθεν γὰρ ἢ κίνησις ἦν ἢ ἀπὸ ψυχῆς; εἰ δ' ἄτακτος ἢ κίνησις, ἀπὸ ἀτάκτου ψυχῆς· εἴρηται γοῦν ἐν Νόμοις τὴν μὲν ἀγαθοειδῆ ψυχὴν ὀρθὰ καὶ ἔμφρονα παιδαγωγεῖν, τὴν δὲ κακεργέτιν ἀτάκτως τε κινεῖσθαι καὶ τὸ ὑπ' αὐτῆς διοικούμενον πλημμελῶς ἄγειν· ἐπιγενομένης δὲ τῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ δημιουργοῦ κοσμοποιΐας τὴν μὲν ὕλην μεθίστασθαι πρὸς τὴν τοῦ κόσμου σύστασιν, τὴν δὲ κακεργέτιν νοῦ μετασχοῦσαν ἔμφρονα ἀποτελεῖσθαι καὶ τεταγμένην ποιεῖσθαι κίνησιν· ἄγει γὰρ εἰς τάξιν τὴν μὲν ἢ τοῦ εἴδους μετουσία, τὴν δὲ ἢ τοῦ νοῦ παρουσία.

For Plutarch, as well as for Atticus — another key figure of Middle Platonism— a malevolent and irrational soul is held responsible for the erratic, chaotic motion of the pre-existing formless matter. Both this malevolent soul and the formless matter are posited to have existed prior to the Demiurge's intervention in the cosmic process. The malevolent soul (*κακεργέτις ψυχὴ*) that Plato references in the *Laws*³⁶ served as a foundational concept for later interpretative traditions that emphasized the ontological dimension of evil. In this pre-cosmic state, the benevolent soul is understood as the vehicle of the Good, whereas the malevolent soul assumes the role of the agent of disorder. Plutarch, therefore, ascribes to pre-cosmic matter a form of natural-ontological organization prior to the Demiurge's creative intervention³⁷. In this primordial phase, *χώρα* (matter) is conceptualized as comprising two distinct aspects: on the one hand, the chaotic, erratic motion associated with the irrational, malevolent soul; on the other,

³⁶ The malevolent soul in *Laws*, presented in a hypothetical context, acts with effects opposite to those of the good soul, see. Pl. *Leg.* 896d-898c. However, it cannot be considered as an actual active force against the goodness of the intelligible.

³⁷ Ferrari F., “La generazione precosmica e la struttura della materia in Plutarco”, *Museum Helveticum*, 53:1, 1996, p. 45.

the passive, receptive substrate of matter³⁸ which remains entirely inert and ontologically neutral. This formless material, without qualities, is the *ἄμορφον σώμα*³⁹. Evil, which cannot be a product of the intelligible Good principle or the inert matter, is attributed to the malevolent soul, which moves the formless matter in a chaotic and disorderly fashion⁴⁰. Following the intervention of the Demiurge, matter is transformed to constitute the ordered cosmos; the malevolent soul, by partaking in the Good through the process of creation, becomes rational and its chaotic movements are brought into alignment with cosmic order⁴¹. In stark contrast to the inert matter of the *Timaeus*, Plutarch's conception of matter here appears as an active, dynamic force.

A parallel line of thought is pursued by Numenius, who attributes the cause of matter's disorderly motion, that is, the cause of evil, to the soul of matter. Numenius comes even closer to asserting that matter is not merely chaotic but the very source of evil. In his ontological system, matter corresponds to three different concepts: to the indeterminate Dyad, to Necessity, and to the malevolent World Soul (as indicated in Plato's *Laws*)⁴². The significance of matter, as the antithesis of the Good and the intelligible, is apparent not only by virtue of the identification with the aforementioned, but also in the vast distance that separates it from the highest intelligible principle. For Numenius, unlike the majority of Middle Platonists, the highest divine principle does not interact directly with matter. In his principal metaphysical work, *On the Good*⁴³, of which

³⁸ Plut. *De an. procr.* 1014 ff., 1015B-F. Also see Plut. *Quaest. Plat.* IV, 1003A-B.

³⁹ Matter and formless body, as presented by Plutarch, can be seen as logical abstractions, see Coda E. – Martini Bonadeo C. (eds.), 2014: 255-276 (and especially 263).

⁴⁰ Plut. *De an. procr.* 1015A-E. Dörrie H. – Baltus M., 1996: 399-402; Merlini F. – Bernardini R. (eds.), 2017: 69-74.

⁴¹ Plut. *De an. procr.* 1014D-1015B; *De Is. et Os.* 370E-F.

⁴² Numen. fr. 52, l. 65-67. See also Jourdan F., "La matière à l'origine du mal chez Numénius (Fr. 43 et 52 Des Places)", *Philosophie antique: Problèmes, Renaissances, Usages*, 14, 2014, pp. 185-235.

⁴³ Numen. fr. 1-22. For the divine triad of Numenius, see Lisi F. L., "Los tres niveles de la divinidad en Numenio de Apamea", *Cuadernos de Filosofía*, 26-27, 1977, pp. 111-130; Di Stefano E., 2010; Müller G., "La

only fragments survive, Numenius outlines a triadic hierarchy of gods, corresponding to distinct levels of reality: the highest level belongs to the first god, identified with Being and the Good. This deity exists in a state of absolute immobility and changelessness, concerned solely with the intelligible, entirely removed from any productive or creative activity. The second god is the Demiurge or craftsman, analogous to Plato's Demiurge and responsible for imposing order upon matter. Within this structure, a third god appears, viewed as either an independent deity or as a dual-aspected manifestation of the second god, possessing both a higher and lower nature. Since the first divine remains immobile and in perpetual repose, the responsibility for interacting with matter shifts to the second god, who, in his primary state, contemplates the intelligible, but when concerned with matter, exhibits a dual nature and becomes the third god. This third god is "generated" when the second god, succumbing to his desire for the material realm, is divided by the attraction exerted by matter. In this process, when matter exerts its seductive pull, the second god, neglecting his engagement with the intelligible, neglects himself (*ἀπερίοπτος ἑαυτοῦ*)⁴⁴.

This point is particularly significant, as it highlights Numenius' assertion of an ontologically elevated concept of evil, one capable of intervening in the nature of the second god and dividing him⁴⁵. The introduction of a third divinity in this

doctrina de los tres dioses de Numenio", *Archai: The Origins of Western Thought*, 5, 2010, pp. 29-35; O'Brien C. S., 2015: 139-168. However, there is also the view that the gods of Numenius should not be considered as hierarchically arranged intellectual entities but as a progressive unfolding of the same being on the scale of reality, starting from the first god and, through the second, reaching the third and final one. In other words, it is a system with elements of modalistic theism, based on the fact that all the elements of the intelligible have the primordial being at their core, see Kenney J. P. (ed.), 1991: 72-73. For the inactive nature of Numenius' first god see Buganza J., "La metafísica de Numenio", *Studium: filosofía y teología*, 47, 2021, pp. 10-16.

⁴⁴ Numen. fr. 11.17-19.

⁴⁵ Here, the reciprocal relationship between matter and the intelligible agent takes a different turn compared to what was suggested in Pl. *Amat.* 770A-B. While Plutarch attributes the element of will to both matter and the intelligible principle, so that one desires the other, Numenius' second

theological ontology (or the dual nature of the second god) serves to clarify further the impact of the evil inherent in matter on the intelligible realm. By dividing the second god, Numenius ensures an additional intermediary stage between matter and the highest good principle. According to Numenius, matter, which is co-eternal with the intelligible realm, ceases to be evil only when it is shaped by the Ideas⁴⁶. Thus, this ontologically elevated conception of evil, rooted in primordial matter, positions it as a force in direct opposition to the Good. However, this does not suggest that matter becomes ontologically equivalent to the Good, for the Demiurge ultimately subjugates it in the process of creating the cosmos. Nor does it imply that the cosmos itself is intrinsically evil⁴⁷.

In both Plutarch and Numenius, we must recognize that these philosophers expressed, on the one hand, a strongly dualistic tendency, and on the other hand, a profound engagement with philosophical traditions from Egypt and other regions east of the Greek sphere of influence. The ontological dimension of evil, which is emphasized in various parts of their works, could reflect influences from the philosophical systems of these regions. It is documented that Numenius was influenced by “the flourishing nations of the East”⁴⁸, Judaism, Egyptian thought, as well as ideas that emerge in Gnosticism⁴⁹. As for Plutarch, J. Dillon even detects

god, upon contact with matter (which is identified with the dyad), grants it unity, but is simultaneously divided by it (*σχιζεται δὲ ὑπ’ αὐτῆς*). In this case, the active element is distinguished, managing to affect the intelligible, resulting in the creation of a third god, see Numen. fr. 11.

⁴⁶ Numen. fr. 52.33-42.

⁴⁷ J. Dillon attempts to link Gnostic principles with Numenius’ position on matter as a means of attributing to the creator god the designation “less than good, ignorant”, who, due to his enthusiasm for matter, forgets his good origin and creates a world filled with errors and evil. However, he does not go so far as to attribute to the creator god the character of an inherently evil principle, see Dillon, J., 1996: 369.

⁴⁸ Numen. fr. 1.

⁴⁹ Des Places É., 1973: 21-23. For a detailed discussion of the element of evil in Gnosticism, see Jourdan F. – Hirsch-Luipold R. (eds.), 2014: 101-132.

potential Persian influences in his philosophy⁵⁰. This background allows for a better understanding of why these two philosophers, more so than other Middle Platonists, conceived of matter as an active force opposing the Good, whereas the majority of Middle Platonists regarded matter as merely resistant to form due to its inherent nature.

However, even if we acknowledge sufficient justification for these views based on such influences, a significant challenge remains: how can we reconcile the presence of seemingly contradictory perspectives on matter within the works of the same author? Why does Plutarch describe matter as malevolent in one context and neutral or even benign in another? It has been suggested that these divergent interpretations stem from Plutarch's responses to critiques from rival philosophical schools of his time⁵¹. Moreover, while it may be tempting to argue that Plutarch never articulated a definitive theory of matter, the variation in his treatment may be attributed to the distinct philosophical contexts of each work. For example, in *De animae procreatione in Timaeo*, Plutarch addresses the nature of the moving principle, which is separate from shapeless matter. In contrast, in *De defectu oraculorum*, where this distinction is less prominent, the author emphasizes the generally malevolent character of matter⁵².

As for the portrayal of matter as favorably disposed towards the intelligible, as seen in works such as *Amatorius* and *De Iside et Osiride*, this may be attributed to the particularly unique character of these texts. *De Iside et Osiride* exemplifies a bold *interpretatio Platonica* of Egyptian mythology, wherein Plutarch endeavors to elucidate his metaphysical views, which in turn serve as an interpretation of Plato's philosophy. In his

⁵⁰ Dillon underlines that for Plutarch, Necessity (Pl. *Ti.* 48a, 56c, 68e) "cannot be taken as something simply negative and characterless, such as matter, but must be a positive force, the disorderly or 'maleficent' soul [...] open to being brought to order by the Demiurge – and in the case of Isis in the *Isis and Osiris*, positively desirous of it", see Dillon J., 2019: 32

⁵¹ Thévenaz P., 1938: 108-111, where it is further argued that Plutarch was undecided between viewing matter as something completely devoid of quality and viewing it as a corporeal substance that, while formless, was determined to a certain degree.

⁵² Boys-Stones, G., 2018: 113.

attempt to synthesize Platonic metaphysics with Egyptian mythology, Plutarch employs creative analogies and metaphors to illustrate the narrative structure of the text. The confluence of myth and philosophy in this context often happens in a somewhat convoluted manner, as many details of the myth must be incorporated and harmonized. With this in mind, it may not be an exaggeration to consider the entire work as yet another *εἰκῶς μῦθος*, a plausible explanation where, by poetic license, a freer rendition is permitted—though necessary—to integrate the Platonic worldview with Egyptian mythology.

Regarding the *Amatorius*, the unconventional theme of the dialogue, which revolves around the romantic entanglement between the widow Ismenodora and the young Bacchon, may not provide the most appropriate setting for an in-depth exposition of the philosopher's metaphysical theory, especially when one considers the extensive corpus of Plutarch's writings, which includes several lost works that were purely metaphysical⁵³. It has been suggested that while the *Amatorius* undoubtedly carries to a certain degree philosophical meanings, it is also a text with a dramatic structure that can be approached as a theatrical work⁵⁴. Therefore, in a text of this nature, such minor digressions could be justified, insofar as they contribute to the facilitation of the dramatic structure.

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⁵³ Apart from the exegetical works *De Anima Procreatione in Timaeo* and *Quaestiones Platonicae*, there are also titles from technical treatises by the philosopher that have not been preserved but would likely have been dedicated to these issues. See no. 66 (*Περὶ τοῦ γεγονέναι κατὰ Πλάτωνα τὸν κόσμον*) and no. 68 (*Πῶς ἡ ὕλη τῶν ἰδεῶν μετέλληφεν; ὅτι τὰ πρῶτα σώματα ποιεῖ*) in the Catalogue of Lamprias.

⁵⁴ For an analysis of the work as a text with a dramatic structure, see Casanova A. (ed.), 2005: 173-205.

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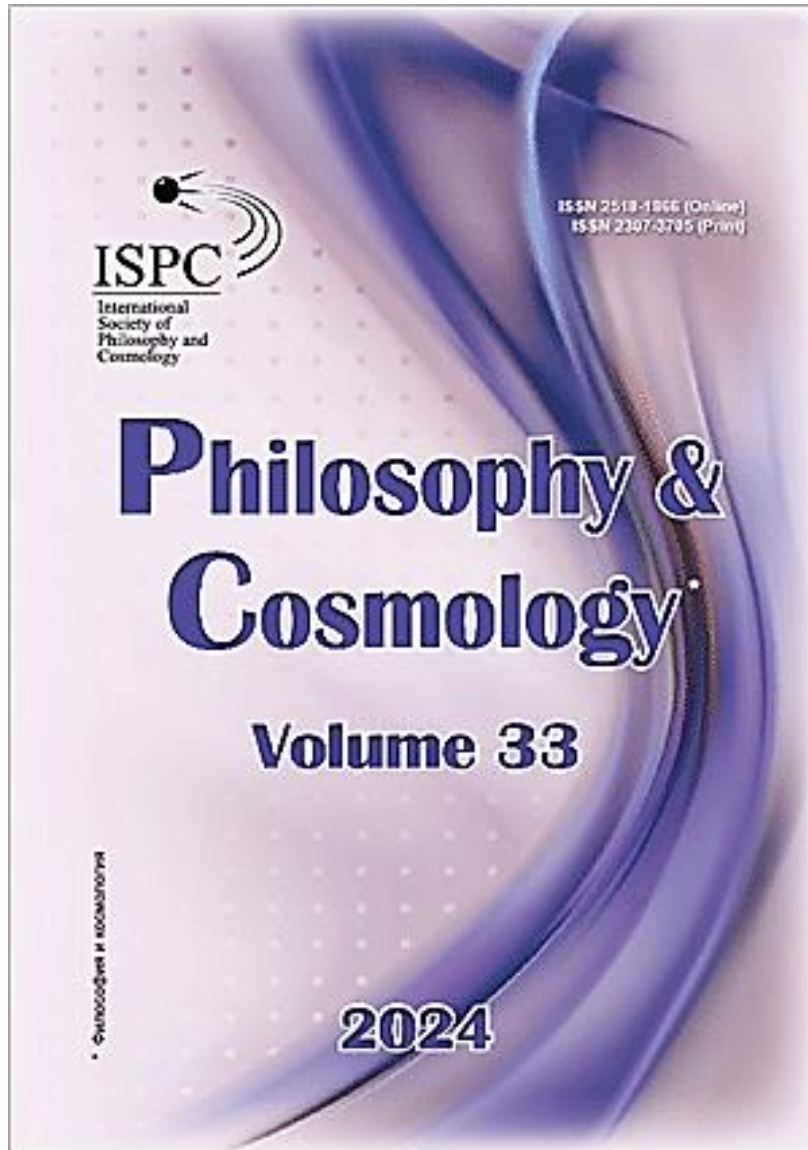
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