

History of Philosophy

06 Plato on God

By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

Abstract:

This text provides an academic overview of **Plato's evolving conception of God** and the origins of the universe. Dr. Arthur Holmes distinguishes Plato's **Demiurge**, a divine craftsman who shapes pre-existing matter, from the later Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation out of nothing. The discussion highlights the **Form of the Good** as the ultimate source of reality and knowledge, acting as a unifying "form of all forms" that directs the **cosmic order**. Using various Platonic dialogues, the lecture explains how a **world soul** animates the physical realm to reflect these eternal ideals. Finally, the source addresses the **problem of evil**, suggesting it arises from the inherent instability of material existence and the limitations of the finite world.

Briefing Document:

Plato on God: The Architecture of Being, Becoming, and Cosmic Order

Executive Summary

This briefing document analyzes the philosophical development of Plato's conception of the divine, moving from his Theory of Forms to a sophisticated theology of cosmic and moral order. Central to this synthesis is the "Form of the Good," which serves as the ultimate source of reality and knowledge.

Unlike the Judeo-Christian concept of a creator who acts *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), Plato's God is a "shaper" or "artificer" (Demiurge) who organizes pre-existing "primal matter" according to eternal ideals. The cosmos is presented as a living, "besouled" entity, governed by a World Soul that implements rational order. However, this order is perpetually challenged by "necessity" and the inherent instability of the material world, leading to a cyclical cosmology where periods of divine guidance alternate with periods of chaotic drift. Ultimately, Plato's theology is inseparable from his

ethics: the supreme human good is found in "becoming like the divine" through wisdom and righteousness.

I. The Ontological Framework: Being, Becoming, and Non-Being

To understand Plato's theology, one must first grasp his tripartite arrangement of the universe. This structure defines the relationship between the eternal and the physical.

Realm	Description	Characteristics
Being	The realm of the unchanging and eternal.	The world of Forms; the objects of true thought.
Becoming	The state of change and particulars.	The physical, natural world experienced through the senses.
Non-Being	The total privation of thought and form.	Conceived as "nothing in particular" or "primal matter."

Key Insights:

- **Rejection of *Ex Nihilo*:** Plato does not anticipate the doctrine of creation out of nothing. His "God" works with "primal matter"—an unruly, formless "glop" that has always existed.
 - **The Role of Forms:** A particular thing only becomes "something" by participating in a Form. Non-being is simply the absence of these forms in the primal matter.
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II. The Form of the Good: The "Form of All Forms"

Plato's transition toward theism begins with the need for unity. If there are "umpteen forms," there must be a unifying principle that creates a *cosmos* (universe) rather than a *multiverse*.

- **Definition:** The Form of the Good is the "form of formness" or the "ideal of idealness." It is the supreme kind of being.

- **The Analogy of the Sun:** In the *Republic*, Plato likens the Good to the sun. Just as the sun makes physical objects visible to the eye, the Form of the Good gives "truth to the objects of knowledge" and the "power of knowing to the knower."
 - **Transcendence:** The Good is not merely essence; it "transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power." It is the source of the existence and natures of all other forms.
 - **The One:** In the *Parmenides*, the Good is identified as "The One," a concept that later facilitated the connection between Platonism and monotheistic religions like Judaism and Christianity.
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III. The Cosmic Architecture: Demiurge and World Soul

Plato uses the *Timaeus* and later dialogues to explain how the eternal Forms interact with the material world of Becoming.

The Demiurge (The Artificer)

- **Nature:** A cosmic "workman" or "architect."
- **Motive:** Being good, the Demiurge desired all things to be good and thus shaped the world according to the eternal Forms.
- **Status:** While Plato uses personal language, it is debated whether the Demiurge is a literal personal deity or a personification of the rational planning inherent in the Good.

The World Soul

- **Function:** The active power that pervades, enlivens, and activates the cosmos.
- **The Living Cosmos:** Plato views the universe as a living creature with "body and soul."
- **Rational Order:** The World Soul is the "rational orderer" (akin to Heraclitus' *Logos* or Anaxagoras' *Nous*), ensuring the cosmos moves in accordance with the Forms.

Evolution in Late Dialogues

In *The Laws*, Plato begins to merge these concepts, speaking of God as a "self-moving world soul" who knows all things, cares for human affairs, and rewards good and evil.

IV. The Problem of Evil and "Necessity"

Plato accounts for disharmony and evil through two primary lenses: the resistance of matter and the necessity of change.

1. **Necessity (*Anankhe*):** In addition to reason, "blind forces" or "necessity" operate in nature.
2. **Dualistic Interpretation:** Some interpret Plato as a metaphysical dualist, where eternal matter is "recalcitrant" and resists the order imposed by the soul/reason.
3. **Monistic/Idealist Interpretation:** Others argue that matter is simply "non-being," and evil is merely a shadow or manifestation of the conflict between particulars trying to express form.

"Evils can never be done away with... they must needs haunt this region of our mortal nature. In the divine, there is no shadow of unrighteousness." — **Theaetetus**

V. The Statesman and Cyclical Cosmology

The *Statesman* provides a unique "likely story" regarding the Divine Pilot and the cycles of the universe.

- **The Assisted Era:** God assists the universe, guiding its rotation and maintaining order.
- **The Released Era:** God eventually releases control. The universe, being a "living creature" with its own impulse, begins to revolve in reverse.
- **The Drift into Chaos:** As the universe moves under its own momentum, it eventually "forgets" God. The "ancient condition of chaos" asserts itself, and the world begins to dissolve into a "bottomless abyss of unlikeness."

- **Divine Intervention:** Seeing the confusion, the "Divine Pilot" takes control of the helm once more to restore order, beginning the cycle anew.

VI. Conclusion: The Moral Imperative

For Plato, cosmology is a means to an end: understanding the moral life. The macrocosmic order of the universe serves as a model for the microcosmic order of the city-state and the individual soul.

- **Divine Likeness:** The ultimate goal of human life is to "take flight from this world to the other" by becoming "like the divine as far as we can."
- **Righteousness as Wisdom:** To be righteous and just is to participate in the Good. Ignorance of this divine order is the root of baseness.
- **The Shepherd Metaphor:** God is likened to a "statesman shepherding his people," emphasizing a providential care for the excellence of nature and humanity.

Study Guide:

Plato on God and the Cosmos: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide examines the philosophical frameworks developed by Plato regarding the nature of divinity, the organization of the universe, and the origin of evil. It synthesizes the transition from the Theory of Forms to a cosmological and moral order overseen by a supreme "Good."

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

1. How does Plato distinguish between the realms of Being, Becoming, and Non-being? Being represents the unchanging, eternal realm of thought and the Forms, while Becoming characterizes the physical world of change and particular

things. Non-being is described not as absolute nothingness, but as a total privation of thought and form—essentially "nothing in particular" or primal matter.

2. Why does Plato suggest there must be a "Form of the Good"? To ensure the universe is a unified cosmos rather than a fragmented multiverse, there must be a relationship between the various independent Forms. The "Form of the Good" acts as the "form of all forms," the ultimate ideal of excellence and formness in which all other realities participate.

3. In the context of the Cave Analogy, what is the role of the Sun? The Sun represents the Form of the Good, serving as the source of light that allows the "eye of the mind" to perceive the Forms. It is the cause of knowledge and truth, surpassing both in beauty and dignity while providing the objects of knowledge with their very existence and essence.

4. How does Plato's concept of creation differ from the Judeo-Christian doctrine of *ex nihilo*? Plato does not conceive of a God who creates the universe out of absolute nothingness. Instead, his God is a "shaper" or "organizer" who imposes form and order upon a pre-existing "primal glop" or unruly material matter.

5. What is the "Demiurge" and what is its primary function? The Demiurge, or "Artificer," is a cosmic workman or architect who, being good, desires all things in the universe to be good. This figure plans the cosmos by shaping the material world according to the eternal patterns found in the Forms.

6. What is the "World Soul" and how does it relate to the physical universe? The World Soul is the active, animating power that pervades the cosmos, making the universe a living creature rather than a dead mechanism. It serves as the rational orderer that activates and enlivens the physical body of the world in accordance with the Forms.

7. According to the *Thaetetus*, what is the ultimate goal of the moral life? The ultimate goal is to "take flight" from the world of particulars and become as much like the divine as possible. This involves becoming righteous, just, and wise, as the divine contains no shadow of unrighteousness.

8. How does Plato explain the existence of evil in a universe designed by a good Artificer? Evil is viewed as a form of disharmony or "recalcitrance" occurring when material matter resists the order of reason. It is often attributed to "necessity"

(*anankhe*) or blind natural forces that operate alongside the rational influence of the World Soul.

9. Describe the cyclical cosmology presented in the *Statesman*. Plato suggests the universe undergoes eras where God assists its rotation and eras where He releases control. When released, the universe—as a living creature—eventually begins to revolve in reverse due to its bodily nature, leading to a gradual increase in chaos and forgetfulness of the divine.

10. What is the relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm in Plato's thought? The macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (the individual soul and the city-state) are both intended to be governed by the same rational and moral order. The Form of the Good provides the singular source of order for both the physical cosmos and the ethical life of the individual.

Part II: Answer Key

1. **Being** is eternal/unchanging; **Becoming** is the world of change; **Non-being** is the privation of form or "nothing in particular."
2. It unifies the multiplicity of Forms into a single **cosmos** (universe) by serving as the ultimate archetype of excellence.
3. The Sun is the **Form of the Good**; it provides the power of knowing to the knower and truth/existence to the objects of knowledge.
4. Plato's God is a **shaper/organizer** of pre-existing matter, whereas *ex nihilo* implies creation from absolute nothingness.
5. A **cosmic architect** or "workman" who fashions the world according to the Forms because he is inherently good.
6. A **vital power** or "psyche" that makes the cosmos a living thing and carries out the rational ordering planned by the Artificer.
7. To **become like God** by achieving perfect righteousness, justice, and wisdom.
8. As **disharmony** or the result of "necessity" and the instability of the physical world (matter) resisting the Good.

9. A **cycle** of divine guidance followed by divine release, where the universe's momentum eventually leads back to a "primal chaos" before God takes the helm again.
 10. The **same source of order** (the Good/Reason) applies to the structure of the universe, the governance of the state, and the moral life of the person.
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Part III: Essay Questions

1. **The Sovereignty of the Good:** Analyze the "Form of the Good" as the pinnacle of Plato's metaphysical hierarchy. How does this concept bridge the gap between epistemology (the study of knowledge) and ontology (the study of being)?
 2. **The Nature of the Demiurge:** Evaluate the role of the Artificer in the *Timaeus*. Is the Demiurge a personal deity or a metaphorical representation of rational planning? Support your argument using the text's description of "likely stories" and the Aristocratic view of labor.
 3. **Cosmic Vitalism vs. Mechanism:** Contrast Plato's "World Soul" with a mechanistic view of the universe. How does the Greek concept of *psyche* influence Plato's argument that the cosmos is a "living creature"?
 4. **The Dualist vs. Monist Interpretation of Matter:** Discuss the ambiguity of "Non-being" and "primal matter" in Plato's thought. How does the tension between "Necessity" and "Reason" allow for both Gnostic (dualist) and Neoplatonic (monist) interpretations?
 5. **The Moral Imperative of Cosmology:** Explore why Plato's discussions of the universe's origins (cosmology) often culminate in discussions of ethics and politics. How does the "order" of the stars provide a blueprint for the "order" of the human soul?
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Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
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Anankhe (Necessity)	Blind, causal forces or "fate" in nature that operate independently of rational purpose and can lead to disorder.
Apiron	An undefined, infinite "something" proposed by pre-Socratic thinkers like Anaximander, echoed in Plato's "primal glop."
Artificer (Demiurge)	The "cosmic workman" or planner who shapes the physical world according to the eternal patterns of the Forms.
Becoming	The realm of physical particulars characterized by constant change, growth, decay, and sensory perception.
Being	The realm of the eternal and unchanging; the reality of the Forms and the objects of true knowledge.
Dyad	A "second" principle mentioned in the <i>Laws</i> , often interpreted as a source of disorder or a counter-force to the "One."
Ex Nihilo	A Latin phrase meaning "out of nothing"; a doctrine of creation that Plato did not hold, as he believed in pre-existing matter.
Form of the Good	The supreme Form; the source of existence for all other Forms and the ultimate ideal of excellence and truth.
Macrocosm	The "great world" or the universe as a whole, which reflects a rational and moral order.
Microcosm	The "small world," referring to the individual human being or the city-state, which should mirror the order of the macrocosm.
Non-being	In Platonism, the total privation of form; "nothing in particular" rather than absolute non-existence.
Nous	A Greek term for "mind" or "cosmic reason," a concept Plato adopted from Anaxagoras to explain the ordering of the world.
Psyche	The Greek word for "soul" or "life"; the animating principle that allows for movement and rationality.
World Soul	The rational, active power that pervades and enlivens the entire cosmos, ensuring it moves in accordance with the Forms.

