

History of Philosophy

07 God and Plato on the Human Soul

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Abstract:

This lecture by **Dr. Arthur Holmes** explores **Plato's philosophy** regarding the divine, the universe, and the human spirit. Drawing primarily from the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*, Holmes explains Plato's view of a **mathematically ordered cosmos** crafted by a benevolent "demiurge" who modeled the world after eternal forms. The text highlights the concept of a "**world soul**"—a rational principle that animates the physical universe much like a soul guides a human body. Additionally, the discussion outlines four specific arguments for the **eternality of the soul**, emphasizing its pre-existence and inherent immortality. Holmes concludes by noting how these Platonic ideas significantly influenced later **Christian theology** and Western concepts of justice and morality.

Briefing Document:

Plato on God, the Cosmos, and the Human Soul

Executive Summary

The following document synthesizes the philosophical insights of Plato as presented by Dr. Arthur Holmes, focusing specifically on the *Timaeus*, the *Laws*, and several dialogues regarding the human soul. Central to Plato's thought is the distinction between the eternal world of "Forms" and the physical world of "Becoming."

Critical Takeaways:

- **The Demiurge:** Plato identifies a transcendent "maker" or "artificer" who shapes the physical world according to eternal, unchanging archetypes. Because the maker is good and without jealousy, the resulting cosmos is inherently good and ordered.

- **Cosmic Vitalism:** The universe is conceptualized as a "living creature" possessed of a "world soul" and rational intelligence, rather than a collection of dead matter.
- **Dualism of the Human Soul:** Human beings are microcosms of the universe, consisting of a mortal body and an eternal, immaterial soul. The soul is the ruling principle, existing before birth and surviving after death.
- **Evidence for Immortality:** Plato provides four primary arguments for the soul's eternity: Knowledge by Recollection, the Cyclical Recurrence of Opposites, the Simplicity (indivisibility) of the soul, and the soul as the essential source of life.
- **Moral Foundation:** Belief in a divine shaper is presented as the necessary ground for justice and morality within an ideal society.

Platonic Cosmology: The Act of Creation

In the *Timaeus*, Plato explores the origins and structure of the physical universe. He posits that the world we inhabit is a "particular" that has "come to be," and therefore must have an external cause.

The Role of the Demiurge

Plato introduces the **Demiurge** (the maker or father of the universe) who fashions the cosmos. Key aspects of this creative act include:

- **The Model:** The maker looks to the "unchanging" and "eternal" (the Forms) as a model. If a maker looks only to what has already "come to be," the result cannot be good.
- **The Motivation:** The maker is good and entirely "without jealousy." His desire was for all things to come as near to his own perfection as possible.
- **The Causal Argument:** One of the earliest formulations of a causal argument for a transcendent divine being is found here: that which becomes must do so by the agency of a cause.

The World Soul

Plato argues that the universe is not a dead machine but a "living creature" with its own soul and reason.

- **Intelligence:** Plato asserts that a work with intelligence is superior to one without it. Therefore, the maker fashioned "reason within soul and soul within body."
- **The Rational Ordering Principle:** Just as a human soul guides the body, the "world soul" is the rational ordering principle that governs the physical cosmos.

The Structure of the Universe

Plato's cosmos is built upon mathematical and geometrical foundations, reflecting his Pythagorean influences.

Mathematical Order and Elements

- **Bonding through Proportion:** The four elements (earth, air, fire, and water) are bonded together through "continued geometrical proportion." This mathematical concord creates a unified, "indissoluble" body.
- **Spherical Shape:** The cosmos is fashioned as a smooth, uniform sphere, equidistant from its center.
- **Time and Eternity:** Plato defines time as a "moving likeness of eternity." While the Forms are eternal and unchanging, time is the realm of particulars and a "changing image" of that eternal stability.

The Receptacle (Space)

Plato identifies a third factor in creation known as the **Receptacle**.

- **Definition:** It is the "spatial world"—a vast, empty area into which things come to be.
- **Nature:** It is apprehended not by the senses but by a "bastard reasoning." It provides the situation for all things that come into being.

Interpretive Frameworks

Historians typically view Plato's cosmology through two lenses:

1. **Dualist Interpretation:** The Demiurge combines two eternal realities: the Forms and material elements (matter).
2. **Idealist Interpretation:** The only true reality is "Being" (the Forms). The physical world of "Becoming" has no reality of its own; it is merely a manifestation, shadow, or reflection of the Forms in the Receptacle.

The Human Soul: Nature and Eternality

Plato views the human individual as a microcosm of the cosmos. He maintains a strict **Body-Soul Dualism**, where the soul is the superior, ruling entity.

Entity	Nature	Duration	Function
Soul	Immaterial, Rational	Eternal (Pre-existent & Immortal)	Rules, guides, gives life, coordinates.
Body	Material, Physical	Generated (Mortal)	Subject to death and disintegration.

The Four Arguments for the Soul's Eternality

Dr. Holmes identifies four distinct arguments used by Plato to "tether" his belief in the eternal soul:

1. **Knowledge by Recollection:** (Found in the *Meno* and *Phaedo*) Because individuals (such as an uneducated slave boy) can "recollect" mathematical truths they were never taught in this life, the soul must have acquired this knowledge in a pre-existent state, free from the body.
2. **Cyclical Recurrence of Opposites:** (Found in the *Phaedo*) Drawing on pre-Socratic cyclical views of nature, Plato argues that opposites come from opposites (e.g., waking from sleeping). If death follows life, then life must follow death in a continuous cycle of transmigration or reincarnation.
3. **Simplicity/Immateriality:** Because the soul is immaterial, it is "simple" (indivisible). Unlike composite physical objects, something that cannot be

divided cannot be destroyed. Therefore, the soul is "naturally immortal" and self-existent.

4. **The Source of Life:** (Found in the *Phaedrus*) The soul is defined as the essential life-giving ingredient of the body. Since the soul is the very essence of life, it is "ever-living" and cannot admit its opposite (death).

Moral and Theological Implications

Plato's philosophical framework extends into the realms of political theory and personal morality, particularly in the *Laws* and the *Republic*.

- **The Grounds of Morality:** Plato argues that a justly ordered society must be grounded in the belief in God. He views the shaper of the universe as the supreme God and the source of rational order.
- **Atheism in the State:** In his utopian thinking, Plato suggests that those who do not believe in God (atheists) should have no place in an ideal republic. He views them as "treasonous" because they reject the very grounds of the justice and morality the state requires.
- **Influence on Later Thought:** Plato's description of God looking at his creation and seeing that "it was good" bears a striking resemblance to biblical accounts. Early Christian theologians were so moved by the *Timaeus* that some hypothesized Plato must have read the books of Moses while in Egypt. Regardless of the source, Platonic dualism and his concept of a rational creator profoundly shaped the development of Christian theology.

Study Guide:

God and Plato on the Human Soul

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the philosophical frameworks established by Plato regarding the nature of the cosmos, the divine, and the human soul, as discussed by Dr. Arthur Holmes.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. **What is the role of the "Demiurge" in Plato's cosmology?** The Demiurge is the divine artificer or maker who fashions the physical universe by looking to eternal, unchanging models (Forms). Because the Demiurge is good and free from jealousy, he desires to make the world as much like his own perfection as possible.
2. **How does Plato formulate one of the earliest causal arguments for God?** Plato argues that the cosmos is a physical entity that has "come to be," and anything that becomes must do so through the agency of a cause. This leads to the conclusion that a transcendent maker or father of the universe exists as the source of its beginning and order.
3. **What is the "World Soul," and what function does it serve?** The World Soul is a rational ordering principle that the Demiurge placed within the body of the cosmos to ensure it is excellent and perfect. Just as a human soul guides a human body, the World Soul serves as the driving, animating force that gives the universe rational direction.
4. **How does Plato define the concept of "Time"?** Plato defines time as a "moving likeness of eternity" or a changing image of the eternal realm. While the realm of Forms is eternal and unchanging, the physical world of particulars exists in a state of becoming, which we perceive as time.
5. **Describe the "Receptacle" in Platonic thought.** The Receptacle is the spatial world or "space" that provides a situation for all things that come into

being. It is described as a vast, empty vessel into which the elements are bonded together to form the world of becoming.

6. **Contrast the Dualist and Idealist interpretations of Plato's cosmology.** The dualist view suggests that the Demiurge combines two eternal realities: the Forms and primal matter. The idealist view, which became a dominant historical force, posits that the realm of Forms (Being) is the only true reality, and the physical world is merely a manifestation or "shadow" with no independent being.
7. **What is the "Argument from Recollection" regarding the soul?** This argument suggests that because individuals can grasp innate knowledge (such as mathematical truths) they were never taught, the soul must have acquired this knowledge in a pre-existent state. The soul, freed from the body, perceived eternal Forms and now "recollects" them when stimulated by dialectic.
8. **How does the "simplicity" of the soul relate to its immortality?** Plato argues that the soul is a "simple" rather than a composite thing, meaning it is an immaterial, indivisible unit. Because it has no material parts to be "chopped" or separated, it is indestructible and therefore naturally immortal.
9. **What is the "Cyclical Recurrence of Opposites" argument?** This argument draws on the idea that opposites follow one another in a cycle, such as life following death. If the soul exists after the body dies, it must have pre-existed the body, implying a continuous cycle of transmigration or successive incarnations.
10. **According to the lecture, what are the three levels of soul later delineated by Aristotle?** The three levels are the vegetative soul (functions of nutrition and reproduction), the animal soul (adding sensation and locomotion), and the human soul. The human soul is distinct because it is rational and capable of deliberative thought.

1. **The Demiurge:** Functions as an artificer shaping the cosmos according to eternal archetypes to reflect goodness.
2. **Causal Argument:** Based on the premise that the physical cosmos is a "becoming" thing that requires an external cause/agent.
3. **World Soul:** The animating, rational principle that makes the universe a "living creature."
4. **Time:** A changing image of eternity that characterizes the realm of particulars.
5. **Receptacle:** Space; the third reality (after Being and Becoming) that allows for the existence of physical things.
6. **Dualist vs. Idealist:** Dualists see two eternal substances (form/matter); Idealists see only Being as real, with matter as a shadow.
7. **Recollection:** Uses innate knowledge (like the slave boy's math) to prove the soul existed before birth.
8. **Simplicity:** Immateriality equals indivisibility, which equals indestructibility and natural immortality.
9. **Cyclical Opposites:** Uses the natural cycle of life and death to argue that the soul survives death and precedes birth.
10. **Levels of Soul:** Vegetative (plants), Animal (beasts), and Human (rational beings).

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the source context to develop detailed responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Ethics of Cosmology:** Analyze the connection Plato makes between the rational order of the cosmos and the moral requirements of an ideal society. Why does Plato suggest that atheists have no place in a just republic?
2. **Plato and Christian Theology:** Dr. Holmes notes that the *Timaeus* was highly influential on early Christian thinkers. Explore the specific parallels between

Plato's "Demiurge" and the biblical "Creator," particularly regarding the concept of the world being "good."

3. **The Microcosm and the Macrocosm:** Compare Plato's description of the "World Soul" with his description of the human soul. How does the structure of the universe reflect the structure of the individual?
4. **The Nature of Reality (Being, Becoming, and Space):** Discuss Plato's three-fold distinction of reality. How do these three elements interact to create the world we perceive through our senses?
5. **Arguments for the Soul's Eternality:** Evaluate the four arguments for the soul's immortality presented in the text (Recollection, Cyclical Opposites, Simplicity, and the Source of Life). Which does Plato use to establish the soul as "self-existent"?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

- **Becoming:** The realm of physical, tangible, and visible things that change and vanish; the world of particulars.
- **Being:** The realm of eternal, unchanging Forms; the only true object of knowledge.
- **Demiurge:** The "artificer" or "maker" of the universe who shapes the world according to the Forms.
- **Dualism (Body-Soul):** The view that the body and soul are two separate entities united only during physical life.
- **Eternality:** A state that encompasses both pre-existence (existing before birth) and immortality (surviving after death).
- **Forms:** The unchanging, eternal patterns, models, or archetypes used by the Demiurge to fashion the world.
- **Logos:** Reason or the rational order inherent in the universe.
- **Nominalism:** The philosophical view that there are no objectively real universals, only names for particulars.

- **Realism:** The philosophical view that universals and aesthetic values are objectively real.
- **Receptacle:** Space; the "nurse of becoming" that provides the medium for the elements (earth, air, fire, water) to take shape.
- **Simple/Simplicity:** In a philosophical context, refers to being an indivisible unit rather than a composite of parts.
- **Transmigration:** The movement of the soul from one body to another through successive incarnations.
- **World Soul:** The rational animating principle of the physical cosmos, making it a "living creature."