Embodying Intelligence
Animals and Us in Plato’s *Timaeus*

Intelligence,¹ for Plato, does not require body. This I take to be fairly uncontroversial. But equally, intelligence can be embodied, or appear as a feature of bodies. Plato’s perspective, particularly in the *Timaeus*, describes intelligence as something which – either metaphorically or literally – exists independently of bodies, but not of souls.² These intelligent souls undergo something new upon becoming embodied, which provides opportunities for expressions of intelligence hitherto unavailable. While pure mind may exist unembodied, we have and see around us embodied intelligences, and these have a story of their own.

In what follows, I shall be looking at this story. After considering intelligence in general as it relates to soul, I will be interested in what happens to intelligence when it becomes embodied. How is mind manifested physically, and how do physical constraints affect mind? I shall also be asking whether the answers to these questions vary according to the varying bodies there are, and whether these variations matter. Whether in Plato’s living, intelligent universe everything that lives is also intelligent is a discussion that must be postponed to another occasion.³

¹ Usually, but not always, *noûs*. The cognitive success-word of choice is sometimes *phronēsis* or *epistēmē*, and there are others. For an excellent study of Plato’s rich and varied cognitive vocabulary, see Monique Dixsaut’s *Platon et la question de la pensée* (Paris: Vrin, 2000) for a systematic study of the different and related connotations of Plato’s cognitive vocabulary.
² My focus in what follows will be largely on the later dialogues. So far as possible, I aim to remain agnostic about whether Plato ever changed his mind about these matters, while leaving room for supposing that at least some discussions across different dialogues can legitimately illuminate each other, and form a single view and set of motivations that might justly be described as ‘Platonic’.
³ I pursue this discussion in „Embodying Intelligence?: Plant Life in Plato’s *Timeaus*“ (manuscript).
I. Intelligence

Intelligence for Plato is not a substance, in this sense: It is not capable of independent existence.\(^4\) It is necessarily an attribute of soul – without soul, no intelligence. This was sometimes doubted by the later Platonist tradition.\(^5\) So I bring forward a handful of relevant texts that seem to state the matter unambiguously:

\(\text{TI}\)\(^6\)

A: „There could be no wisdom [sophia] and intelligence [noûs] without soul.“ (\textit{Philebus} 30e9)

B: „Intelligence cannot be present to/to xxx anything without soul.“ (νοῦν δ’ αὖ χωρίς ψυχῆς ἀδύνατον παραγενέσθαι τῷ) (\textit{Timaeus} 30b3)

C: „And if anyone should ever call that in which these two [νοûς ἐπιστήμη τε, 37c2] arise, not soul but something else, what he says will be anything but true“. (\textit{Timaeus} 37c3-5)

D: „But are we saying it has both those things in it [understanding (νοûν) and life (ζωήν), 249a4], while denying that it has them in its soul? „How else would it have them?“ (\textit{Sophist} 249a7-9)

Why is this? Why should intellect, which is in other ways at least among the finest of existing things, require a soul to support it? This might seem like an odd question even to pose; for it may just seem obvious that intelligence is not the sort of thing capable of independent existence, and so requires some substance in which to inhere. Intelligence is a capacity, or faculty; and faculties or capacities must belong to something or another.

But in a way, this is precisely the question: Why should intelligence be conceived as a faculty of \textit{something}, rather than as a thing in its own right? In English, for example, we are happy to speak of „minds“; and, unphilosophically, this indicates a substantive, essentially intelligent \textit{thing}. On the face if it, if we are getting into the business of adding substances to our ontology, it is unclear why „being alive“ should be more suited to reification into „soul“ than „intelligent“ is suited to become „mind“. If objects apart

\(^4\) I leave to one side the thorny issue of whether „capable of independent existence“ is a \textit{Platonic} criterion for „substance“; but see Fine, „Separation“ (recently republished in Fine, \textit{Plato on Knowledge and Forms}. Oxford: Clarendon Press [2003], 252-300). With this I leave also the question, difficult for Plato, of whether noûs is (an) \textit{ousia}, in his sense of \textit{ousia}.


\(^6\) Translations of the \textit{Timaeus} are generally modifications of Donald Zeyl’s translation (Indianapolis: Hackett. 2000); \textit{Philebus} translations follow Dorothea Frede (Indianapolis: Hackett. 1993); passages from the \textit{Sophist} are taken, with occasional alteration, from Nicholas White’s translation (Indianapolis: Hackett. 1993).
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from bodies are capable of independent existence, why should it be any odder to suppose that intelligence is one of these rather than – or perhaps in addition to – soul?

Such a separation of intelligence from soul even has a certain Platonic pedigree. Plutarch distinguishes intellect from soul, suggesting intellect is capable of separate existence;7 and Plotinus later makes precisely this move when he distinguishes soul, and the sort of thinking proper to it (viz., δύναμις), from Intellect (νοῦς).8 Although there is some sense in which the exercise of true intellect can occasionally be ‗ours‘, intellect proper, according to Plotinus, is not an attribute of soul, but rather something which the soul, through effort, can make use of or make contact with. So both ordinary speech, and later philosophers of a Platonic bent – both the many and the wise – are comfortable with the notion that intelligence is something, a mind or an intellect, and is not simply a modification or power of something else.9 Thus, in insisting as he does that intelligence requires soul, Plato is making a choice – perhaps a philosophically motivated one.

So it is legitimate to ask why it is that intelligence is, for Plato, an attribute. And there is a further question: Why, if intelligence must be an attribute of something or another, must it be an attribute of souls? Why not make it an attribute of bodies? Or posit some other entity – say ‗mind‘, or ‗consciousness‘, or ‗us‘ – which can be the bearer of intelligence?

Looking at this more specific question will, I think, illuminate the first question as well. For Plato’s reasons for supposing intelligence is an attribute are inseparable from his reasons for supposing it must be soul of which intelligence is an attribute.

Consider the surrounding context of the Sophist quote above (Sophist 248e7-249b1):

T2: (Theaetetus speaks to the Visitor from Elea)

EV: But for heaven’s sake, are we going to be convinced that it’s true that change, life, soul, and thought [φασινήν] are not present in that which


8 See Ennead V.3 (49): ‗What then prevents pure intellect from being in soul? ... Nothing, we shall reply. But ought we to go on to say that it belongs to soul? No, we shall not say that it belongs to soul ...‘ Intellect is separate (χωρίς τοῦς).

9 Of course, this simplifies the situation somewhat, for a Platonist might well hold that ‗attributes‘ and properties – such as ‗justice‘ and ‗proportion‘ – are indeed separately existing entities. Menn’s argument, for instance, is that νοῦς is ‗intelligence‘, and so a virtue, and so like ‗justice‘ capable of existence independently of soul. This argument, however, surreptitiously relies on a tendentious claim about self-predication: that the Justice which exists eternally is a just thing, and likewise the νοῦς that exists separately from soul is an intelligent thing. Fine’s discussions of ‗Separation‘ and ‗Immanence‘ in Plato are excellent for making clear what Plato did not have to mean by ‗exists independently‘.
wholly is, and that it neither lives nor thinks [φοινεύειν], but stays changeless, solemn, and holy, without intelligence (ψοφία)?

TH: If we did, sir, we’d be admitting something frightening.

EV: But are we going to say that it has intelligence [ψοφία] but doesn’t have life [ζωή]?

TH: Of course not.

EV: But are we saying that it has both those things in it while denying that it has them in its soul?

TH: How else would it have them?

EV: And are we saying that it has intelligence [ψοφία], life, and soul, but that it is at rest and completely changeless even though it is alive [ζωήσιμον]?

TH: All that seems to me completely unreasonable.

The aims of this much-contested passage concern more directly the question of whether change exists, really and properly exists. But we can avoid most of the controversies of interpretation, for the point we want is plainly stated: intelligence must be active.10 The priority is that whatever is intelligent be alive, in order that it be capable of doing something – viz. of thinking. To think is to do something. And doings – as opposed to mere events – require self-motion, or original motion that is not merely reactive, or an exchange of impulse between smaller parts. But capacity for this sort of motion just is what it is to be alive.11 And this, in turn, is synonymous with (or implies) having a soul.

II. Intelligent Souls

So intelligence must be an attribute of souls because it is, or consists in, activity – not stasis or passivity; and to be active, one must be alive.

And while intelligence cannot exist independently of soul, the souls to which the intelligence belongs – that is, intelligent souls – can exist independently. And this ‘independently’ here means, of course, independently of body; but also ‘independently of any other parts or attributes’ – that is to say, there can be something which is nothing but intelligent soul; it has no other parts or aspects.12 In fact, purely and exclusively intelligent is the primary way in which soul exists.

10 Compare Timaeus 36a-37d, where the world-soul’s motion is its thinking.

11 Compare Phaedrus 245c-6: ‘Every soul is immortal. That is because whatever is always in motion is immortal, while what moves and is moved by something else stops living when it stops moving. So it is only what moves itself that never desists from motion, since it does not leave off being itself.’ The centrality of non-mechanical motion, or ‘self-motion’, in ‘being alive’, and its relation to teleology – motivation by recognition of ‘the good’ – becomes acutely important regarding plant-life.

12 At least none that do not follow immediately – such as, e.g. knowing, thinking, reasoning, perhaps judging.
In the *Timaeus*, ‘primary‘ is indicated temporally: purely intelligent soul is the first created, and created by the most perfect creator; in *Republic X*, the suggestion is that intelligent soul is what is left when various unnatural accretions are shed (*Republic X.611b8-612a6*); the *Phaedo* famously claims that all pleasure and pain belong properly to the body (*Phaedo 80-85, esp. 84d*), leaving little but intelligence to belong properly to the soul – intelligent, and only intelligent, is what soul really is; and while this is revised in the *Philebus*, this late dialogue still confirms the priority of intelligent soul, first by ascribing it to the gods (*Philebus 33b6-7*), and second by making all human experience dependent upon intelligence, while intellectual activity is not likewise dependent on less cognitive human experience.

Except for the *Timaeus*, all of these contexts explicitly concern human souls. Our souls, at least, are primarily, truly, essentially intelligent souls, and *purely* intelligent souls. It may be that Plato thought soul was essentially intelligent in a stronger sense: namely, that *all* soul, *qua* soul is intelligent. An argument that might imply this is found in the *Philebus*. For now, however, we restrict our attention to those souls we know Plato took to be primarily intelligent.

So we will begin our study here: While this is the primary state of soul, or at least of our souls, this is not the condition in which we actually find souls. Our experience with intelligent souls – at least, that experience which most of us can explicitly remember – is with *embodied* intelligent souls. The question to begin with, then, is this: What happens when an intelligent soul finds itself embodied? How is its intelligence then modified and expressed?

III. Embodied intelligent souls 1: Humans

If we look only at the *Timaeus*, the consequences of embodiment for intelligent souls are pretty clear: two extra bits, called ‘mortal‘, get added to the immortal intelligent soul created by the Demiurge (*Timaeus 69c-70b*). But we should be cautious about

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13 „But to see the soul as it is in truth, we must not study it as it is maimed by its association with the body and other evils – which is what we were doing earlier – but as it is in its pure state, that’s how we should study the soul, thoroughly and by means of logical reasoning … [Like the sea-god, Glaucus] the soul, too, is in a similar condition when we study it, beset by many evils. That, Glaucis is why we have to look somewhere else in order to discover its true nature. ‘To where?’ To its philosophy, or love of wisdom. We must realize what it grasps and longs to have intercourse with, because it is akin to the divine and immortal and what always is, and we must realize what it would become if it followed this longing with its whole being, and if the resulting effort lifted it out of the sea in which it now dwells, and if the many stones and shells (those which have grown all over it in a wild, earthy, and stony profusion because it feasts at those so-called happy feastings on earth) were hammered off it. Then we’d see what its true nature is and be able to determine whether it has many parts or just one and whether or in what manner it is put together.” (trans. Grube, rev. Reeve, in Cooper, ed. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett. 1997)
taking this 'bolting on' of two distinct parts too literally. In fact, adding soul(-part) to soul(-part) might be altogether the wrong way to think of the relation between rational and appetitive soul. In spite of assigning the different functions of soul to different parts of the body, there must — as in the Republic — remain some sense in which humans have one soul, and not three. Holding to this thought may give us a way to model the tri-partite soul, and so to understand soul as a whole.

There are two ways in which we might consider the unity of this differentiated soul. First, the role of the intelligent part is to rule over, and be concerned with the whole. And this activity of concern, the process of considering wisely with respect to one another the various bodily and social demands and impulses in a person, makes these otherwise disparate inclinations into a unity. Such a notion of the unity of soul, familiar from the Republic, might safely be carried over into the Timaeus, which begins by so generously paraphrasing the Republic — especially since this sort of authority of reason is re-iterated in the Philebus. 14

Second, we might instead regard the resulting unity of a complex soul from another direction, from the perspective of the mechanisms by which the intelligent part of the soul exercises this governing power. All sensation, 15 says Timaeus, arises via to phronimon — the intelligent part of the soul. 16 Physical events occur in the body; some of these motions are communicated through the body, to the intelligent part, and from there to the soul as a whole.

**T3:** When even a minor disturbance affects that which is easily moved by nature, the disturbance is passed on in a chain reaction...until it reaches to phronimon (64b5) and reports the property that produced the reaction. (Timaeus 64b3-6)

So the multi-faceted embodied soul becomes a unity not only through the exercise of reason regarding the whole soul and animal, but also through bodily events affecting the soul, and hence reason, in becoming perception. 17

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14 See Philebus 63a-64a, where reason is granted the privilege of deciding which pleasures are suited to a good life.
15 Or 'perception': the Greek εἰςορῶ does not distinguish between our 'sensation' and 'perception', nor does Plato. This, I take it, is not an oversight, but rather a substantial piece of theory.
16 This interpretation of to phronimon (το ἐρωτίμον) is contested: see Denis O’Brien’s „Perception et intelligence dans le Timée de Platon“. (Interpreting the Timaeus-Critias: Proceedings of the IV Symposium Platonicum. Edited by Tomás Calvo and Luc Brisson. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag. 1997). Doubt over the standard translation arises only when sensation is ascribed to plants (Timaeus 77b). In spite of objections raised, I still think the standard translation is the correct one (for reasons, see „Embodying Intelligence?: Plant Life“), and will use it here.
17 Luc Brisson’s description, a variant of the same point, has sense perception as a ‘measuring operation’. „For Plato in the Timaeus, sense-perception is really a measuring operation as indicated by the frequent use of the word summetria...ultimately the capacity for a thing to be compared to something else, namely by way of measuring.“ (‘Plato’s Theory of Sense Perception in the Timaeus’, Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy 13 [1999]: 147-176.)
The moral psychology of the *Philebus* requires the same implication of cognition in perception and sensation. In a passage parallel to *Timaeus* 64b [T3], Socrates tells Protarchus that only those bodily motions that reach the soul cause sensation (*aisthēsis*).

**T4:** You must realise that some of the various affections of the body are extinguished within the body before they reach the soul, leaving it unaffected. Others penetrate through both body and soul and provoke a kind of upheaval that is peculiar to each but also common to both of them. (*Philebus* 33d-e)

To understand pleasure aright, we must grasp perception generally, and how this relates to memory. Perception not only provides material for cognition; it also takes its shape in the first place in a cognitive context. For to affect the soul is to become intelligible – thus the imagined life devoid of all thought makes the sensations supposed to remain into something unrecognizable (*Philebus* 21b6-d4). This link between cognition and perception underwrites the claim that pleasures can be true and false, and indeed that the only thing that can go wrong with pleasures is that they should be false. Pleasures can be true and false because cognition is integral to determining their nature, and this is because cognition – the activity of the intellect – is an integral part in the process of any bodily affection becoming a sensory experience. All human experience involves intelligence, in some way or another.

These complementary ways of regarding the unity of a complex, embodied soul are, however, misleading. For each suggests that we might still be thinking of separate souls or soul-parts growing into a unity through their interaction. But this will not do, most obviously for the lower types of soul. For in their case, there can be no existence independent of immortal, rational soul. For them to carry out their distinctive functions – in order for them to be anything at all – they must be communicating with intelligent soul. Sensation exists in virtue of intelligent soul. By contrast, while sensation essentially involves intelligence, mind is not essentially a percipient thing – for it does its own work perfectly well without having any bodily events to work with.

It is in this way that we should understand the ‘addition of’ a sensible soul to an intelligent one. Rather than the association of two kinds of soul, we are better off thinking in terms of modifications of the only kind of soul there is. Percipient is something intelligent soul becomes in virtue of being in, or belonging to, a body. We might put this another way: sensory experience is what happens when intelligent soul is put into a body. New capacities and possibilities emerge in virtue of being causally affected by a body of a certain sort.

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18. "It seems we have first to determine what kind of thing memory is; in fact I am afraid we will have to determine the nature of perception even before that of memory." (*Philebus* 33c8-10) Memory in the *Philebus* belongs explicitly to the class of cognitive success-terms: "Not these, but knowing, understanding and remembering [τὸ ἀναγνωρίζειν καὶ τὸ γνῶναι καὶ μεμνημένην], and what belongs to them, right judgement and true calculations, are better..." (*Philebus* 11b6-c1)

19. *Philebus* 36c ff., esp. 36c-42c; see 40e8-9 for the claim that pleasures are bad only by being false.
One might object that allowing intelligent soul to be affected by embodiment makes eternal souls changeable, and so not eternal after all. But whatever Plato thinks, 'eternal' implies, it is not total unchangingness.20 For, in the Timaeus, he emphasizes the way that intelligence is affected by sensory experience (Timaeus):

T5: And they went on to invest this body – into and out of which things were to flow – with the orbits of the immortal soul. These orbits, now bound within a mighty river, neither mastered that river nor were mastered by it, but tossed it violently and were violently tossed by it ... All these disturbances [παθήματα] are no doubt the reason why even today and not only at the beginning, whenever a soul is bound within a mortal body, it at first lacks intelligence [ἀνους]. But as the stream that brings growth and nourishment diminishes and the soul's orbits regain their composure ... their revolutions are set straight, to conform to the configuration each of the circles takes in its natural course. They then correctly identify what is the same and what is different, and render intelligent [ἐμφάνοις] the person who possesses them. (Timaeus 43a3-7, 44a7-b7)

So intelligent soul becoming attached to mortal soul is less metaphorically a matter of intelligent soul acquiring additional capacities in virtue of its context, or latent capacities of intelligence being brought out by embodiment. The immortal, rational soul itself becomes, in part, mortal and percipient.

T6: Once the souls were of necessity implanted in bodies, and these bodies had things coming to them and leaving them, the first innate capacity they would of necessity come to have would be sense perception, which arises out of forceful disturbances. This they would all have. The second would be love, mingled with pleasure and pain. And they would come to have fear and spiritedness as well, plus whatever goes with having these emotions, as well as their natural opposites. (Timaeus 42a4-b2)

The mortal soul fashioned by the lesser gods is thus not distinguished from immortal soul by the fact that it is affectable or affected, while immortal soul is sublimely impassive. 'Mortal soul' cannot mean merely 'that part of the soul affected by the fact that it is in a body'; for it is intelligent, immortal soul that is primarily affected by embodiment. Nor does 'mortal' indicate that some part of the soul dies; for the capacity to become perciplent remains in every soul, whether or not it is currently embodied. 'Mortal' must then mean not 'dying', but rather 'concerned with the dying bit'; it is that aspect or function of soul that we have in virtue of involvement with mortal stuff, viz.,

20 See Gail Fine’s discussion in ‘Immanence’ (Plato on Knowledge and Forms, 301-349) on what is implied by Forms’ eternality.
in virtue of having a body. Being embodied, immortal soul comes to have capacities relevant to being in the sort of world in which things die, and are born.21

Embodied rational soul is one in which inessential features of immortal soul are made manifest in virtue of its presence in body. Mortal soul is, we might say, one way immortal soul manifests itself. The lesson of animals on this point is instructive.

IV. Embodied intelligent souls 2: Non-human animals

The Timaeus tells a tale of degenerative creation. The finest possible intelligent agency looks to the finest of intelligible things, in order to instantiate it as well as possible in the recalcitrant materials available. This intelligence does this by creating a perfect soul; for [T7] „in all the realm of visible nature, nothing without intelligence (άνυπτον τοῦ νουν, 30b2) is ... superior to anything with it“ (Timaeus 30b1-3), and as we have seen soul is the bearer of intelligence. But anything created by a perfect intelligence could only be perfect; so the Demiurge engages other, created and hence dependently good intelligences (the lesser gods) to complete the body of the world-soul by creating mortals. To these demi-gods, then, also falls the task of creating further psychic capacities suited to, and required by an embodied intelligence, in virtue of its embodiedness (see Timaeus 40b-42e).

By embodying immortal souls, the lesser gods create human beings, who in their turn create all the other animals, albeit inadvertently – for the degree and kind of moral imperfection or degradation of each living human being dictates a reincarnation in the sort of body suited to what his degenerate soul, during his human lifetime, has become. Just as the creative activity of the lesser gods is a lesser imitation of the Demiurge’s original creative activity,22 so too this human creation of the animals is a fainter imitation still of the ideal creative activity. There are two obvious ways in which the human creation of the animal world is less perfect than the sort of creation the Demiurge modeled in creating the cosmos: (1) Although in some sense still aiming at the good, human beings are desperately confused about what this is; the Demiurge has a clear view of it. (2) Because this creation of animals is inadvertent, it does not come from wisdom, intelligence, or consideration of ideal exemplars. Human creators of animals

21 Such an interpretation may bring the human soul of the Timaeus closer to that in the Phaedo – presumably a virtue in an account of Plato’s psychology. Christopher Shields offers further and detailed accounts of specific respects in which the apparently multi-partite soul of, e.g., the Republic is compatible with the simple souls of the Phaedo („Simple Souls“ in Essays on Plato’s Psychology, edited by Ellen Wagner. Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Lexington Books. 2001: 137-156; see especially page 149).

22 „Imitate the power I used in causing you to be.“ (41c6); „Now that they had received the immortal principle of the mortal living thing, they began to imitate the craftsman who had made them.“ (42e7-9)
have neither the good, nor a good horse (or cow or bird) in view when engaging in the activity that amounts to the creation of an animal soul.

But more interesting to note is the way in which the human creation of the animal world does resemble the Demiurge’s activity: it is still from and in virtue of who they are that human creations have the character they have. The Demiurge, being good in himself, passes that goodness on to his creations (Timaeus 30a); so similarly, a human being passes on his characteristics to his creation.

T8: If even then [after being re-born as a woman] he still could not refrain from wickedness, he would be changed once again, this time into some wild animal that resembled the wicked character he had acquired. (Timaeus 42c2-4)

Thus later, Timaeus tells us that a frivolous human being, being frivolous (or because he is frivolous), creates another frivolous being – a bird, say.

T9: As for birds ... they descended from innocent but simpleminded men, men who studied the heavenly bodies but in their naïveté believed that the most reliable proofs concerning them could be based upon visual observation. (Timaeus 91d9-e3)

The mechanisms for this transference of characteristics may differ, for a human being is not separate from his creation.23 A human being creates by becoming – creates a bird by becoming a bird, creates a lion by becoming a lion, and so on. That is, it is numerically the same soul that occupies the new, animal body.24

Is it also qualitatively the same soul? We might think that a soul moving from one body to another – indeed, from one type of body to another kind of body altogether – undergoes some radical transformation. Is the formerly human soul, now in a lion body, say, the same in kind as it was before, with the same qualities or characteristics?

From the foregoing discussion, the answer to this should already be clear, if surprising, with profound implications for how we think of non-human animals and ourselves. The soul migrating between two different kinds of body must have the same qualities before and after its migration; for the qualities came first, and so determined the second body. Timaeus goes into some detail emphasizing this.

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23 Interpreters differ on whether the Demiurge is at one with his creation.
24 I take it that all animals are generated in the same way, and that human degeneration is not responsible merely for proto-type animals, which then generate others of their kind without this human ‘donation’. This is for two reasons: first, the moral force of Timaean cosmology is lost if the current human beings no longer risk degeneration into animal bodies in future; second, if proto-type animals generate others without those others also being incarnations of previously (if not immediately previously) human souls, then the children would be something markedly different in kind from their parents.
Land animals in the wild, moreover, came from men who had no use for philosophy and who made no study of the universe whatsoever, because they no longer made use of the revolutions in their heads but instead followed the lead of the parts of the soul that reside in the chest. As a consequence of these way of theirs, they carried their forelimbs and their heads dragging towards the ground, like towards like. (Timaeus 91e-4-9)

The frivolity in the human soul was what required the home of a body suited to a frivolous life; the lust or avarice in a human soul was what called forth the need for a body more suited to a lustful, avaricious life; and so on. So the particular qualities of an individual animal soul – lust or cowardice or ignorance – must be the very same as the qualities of soul of the human that the animal is descended from.

This is true not just of moral qualities, which a soul could – at least in principle – gain or lose. For purely logical reasons, the lesser animal, no matter how lowly, must have intelligent soul – the very same intelligent soul as the human being from whom it is descended. For intelligent soul is, as such, immortal. It cannot be destroyed, and so must survive any changes in lifestyle or living body. And it cannot go anywhere else, if it is to be this soul which is reincarnated. Immortal intelligence is the principle of identity in souls: This soul is the very same soul that it is, whatever else may happen to it and whatever other qualities and capacities it may acquire, just in case it is or hosts just this particular intelligence.

The more clearly we see this, the more sharply we are pressed to wonder what the difference is between animals and us. Given that they and we are both embodied intelligences in some sense, what accounts for the fact that we are the ‘rational animal’ and they are not? Or, what distinguishes the way in which animals are ‘rational’ from the way in which we are?

The short answer and, I shall argue, the (very nearly) correct answer, is (A1) absolutely nothing. But seeing why and exploring the consequences reveals some remarkable aspects of Plato’s conception of the natural world, our place in it, and relation to others. The best way to do this is to try some alternative answers to what makes ‘us’ different from ‘them’.

The tempting answer (A2): We are actively intelligent; we have an intelligence to call our own, while animals merely express intelligence through being what they are. That is, how an animal is organized, and how it is constructed to behave shows evidence of an intelligence – an intelligent creator perhaps, or an intelligence at work throughout Nature – but not an intelligence which belongs specifically to that animal and no other. We might be tempted to suppose that animals merely express an intelligence not their own, through their behaviour and constitution, while we by contrast

25 See Timaeus 43d-e; e. g., regarding the circles of the Same and the Different, however „mutilated and disfigured“ they become, „cannot be completely undone except by the one who had bound them together.“ Stephen Menn offers the opposite view, in Plato on God as Nous, esp. pp. 53-57; it is difficult to see, on his view, why souls originally having intelligence and implanted into human bodies should be reborn at all, or in what sense it is ,the same‘ soul.
actively reflect on, and so shape and govern our own intelligent activities. Animals on this view would be intelligible things, but intelligent themselves merely by playing a function role within an intelligent whole.

Now, there might be a place in Plato’s universe for such minimal, functionally-defined ‘intelligence’; the whole body of the cosmos might be alive in such a way. But this is not what Plato’s animals are. Animals, in the Timaeus, each carry within them a distinct immortal soul, distinct in particular from the world-soul. This is because they are descended from us, carrying with them the very same active intelligence that was originally made human. Indeed, it is the condition of that intelligence – not its presence or absence – that determines which sort of body it will come to inhabit. Notice how the physical degeneration between animals (continued from T10, above) is marked specifically by a decline in the quality of their intelligence: deficient engagement with philosophy (91e4) and natural explanation (91e1-3, e4) first, and now ignorance and stupidity. 26

T11: The god placed a greater number of supports under the more mindless beings, so that they might be drawn more closely to the ground. As for the most mindless of these animals, the ones whose entire bodies stretch out completely along the ground, the gods made them without feet, crawling along the ground, there being no need of feet anymore. The fourth kind of animal, the kind that lives in water, came from those men who were without question the most stupid and ignorant of all. (Timaeus 92a3-b2)

And it is because of the persistence of intelligence, no matter how degraded, that the telos of animals is the very same as ours: to restore the proper circling of rational activity and thus ultimately to return the soul to its native star.

T12: … And he would have no rest from these toilsome transformations until he had dragged that massive accretion of fire-water-air-earth into conformity with the revolution of the same and uniform within him, and so subded that turbulent, irrational mass by means of reason. This would return him to his original condition of excellence (πρώτης καὶ ἀριστής αἴφικαρτο ἕιδος ἔξεως). (Timaeus 42b5-d2)

Animals, at least animal souls, can in principle become better than they are. And this ‘becoming better’ is nothing other than re-ordering the circles of the Same and Different which constitute the correct operation of noēs. Conversely, they can also become worse; and this would be a matter of further disorder, or more entrenched disorder, in the motion of the circles of the Same and Different, induced by the assault on rational soul by sensation, appetites and desires originating in the other, mortal parts of the soul. That is, improvement and corruption consist in the very same thing, for humans and other

26 ἀφρόσια, 92a4; ἀφρονεστάτως, 92a5; ἀνοητοτάτων, 92b1-2.
animals alike. And likewise, the proper aim or end of every animal, no matter how lowly, is exactly the same as ours: *viz.*, to restore intelligent soul to its original, uncorrupted state, and so allow the rational soul to return to its native star. It is the very same star that is native to, or the proper aim, of a given human being and the animal he becomes.

Psychically (or psychologically), in both character and intellect, animals are identical to confused, ignorant human beings: the very same circles of Same and Different are running amok in both cases, just as when humans are young and overwhelmed by sensory input or influences. In animals, just as in most humans, the rational part of the soul is at the mercy of the less rational parts of soul, so that animals are irrational in the truest sense of the word: they have rationality, but they consistently fail to follow it; it is, if it operates at all, a slave to the passions.

Focusing thus on the fact that animals and humans have, in all respects, the same souls, has the advantage of explaining Aristotle’s complaint, in de Anima 1.1, (T13) that „as things are, people who speak and inquire about the soul seem to study the human soul only“ (402b3-5). Since animals, and even plants as we shall see later, are granted souls in the Timaeus, this complaint seems misplaced – and so Alexander’s comment that Aristotle’s target here is indeed Plato, and in fact the Timaeus itself, has been disputed. But the souls that animals are granted in the Timaeus are clearly nothing other than human souls; and this is likely to occasion Aristotle’s frustration that animal souls as such have not been investigated – because, as we have seen, the Timaeus does not even recognize there is such a thing.

Since all animal souls of all sorts are descended from human beings, everything alive under the sun is either a plant, or a fallen star.

If the nature of reason and virtue is identical in humans and other animals, then perhaps (A3) the difference between animals and us is really just one of body. Ours are shaped like this; and theirs are shaped like that (pl.). In particular, setting aside all the different animal body-shapes that make for various modes of living, humans – but not other animals – have bodies in which the circles of the Same and the Different might possibly return to their proper, uncorrupted state. Such improvement is, at least, phy-

27 By R. D. Hicks (Aristotle’s de Anima, with translation, introduction and notes. Cambridge: CUP [1907], 184) T14: [A] „Obviously the solution of the present problem presupposes a comparative study of all species of animals and (cf. 411b27 sq.) plants. For A.’s own procedure the precept given 414b32 is ἦστε καὶ ἐκατότον ἡμιτητέον, τις ἐκατότου ψυχή, ὀινὸν τὸν φυσικαὶ καὶ τῆς ἀνθρωποῦ ἡ ὄργας. Alex. Aphr. apud Philop. 36.13 and Simpl. 12.31 sq. think the criticism is aimed at Plato, especially in the Timaeus, where, however, the soul even of the plant is distinctly recognised (77a, b), and everything which partakes of life is declared to be a ζωοῦν and to have some sort of soul.” And by W. D. Ross (Aristotle: de Anima. Oxford: Clarendon [1961], 167) T14: [B] „[νόμιμον ... ἐπικοινώνειν; the reference may be, as Alex. ap. Philop. 36.15 and Simpl. 12.31 think, to the Timaeus. But in fact Plato takes account of the lower animals (Timaeus 91d6-92c9), and of plants (76e7-77e5) and the reference is more probably to other members of the Academy.” [The Philoponus text referred to, On Aristotle’s, de Anima’, 36.13-16, can now be found translated by Philip J. van der Eijk (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 2005), p. 52]
ically possible. Animals, on the other hand, have bodies shaped in such a way that those circles cannot, physically cannot, ever right themselves. For example, in land animals \[T15\] „the tops of their heads became elongated and took all sorts of shapes, depending on the particular way the revolutions were squeezed together from lack of use“ (Timaeus 91e9-92a2). Once a skull is elongated, it would seem to be impossible for the intellect housed in that skull to return to its normal activity.

If this is right, and the difference between animals and us is that, while we both have rationality, and behave irrationally, only humans are at least physically capable of living according to reason. Recall that for a horse, say, „to be good‘ is exactly the same thing as for a human – it is to restore the natural state of rational soul; but now the only difference remaining is this: that no matter what the horse does, it can only do this badly. No credit is given to the horse for being a good horse; for, a „good horse‘ might be one that serves our human purposes well, or it might be one that grazes as and when it should, runs as and when it should. But neither the human-carrying nor the grazing will restore the circles of the Same and Different in the horse’s misshapen skull; and only this is the true aim of its soul. Horses have disordered souls, we might think, just because they are horses, in horsey bodies; and so too with birds, snakes and the rest.\[28\]

The type of body the soul has been born into makes it impossible for that soul to recover its original state.

But then, if the difference between „them‘ and „us‘ is that they are absolutely incapable of attaining their natural end, while we are not, this would make a mockery of the suggestion that there could be any return to the heavens once a human soul has fallen among animals (e.g. \[T12\], above). Supposedly souls fallen among animals have some chance at least – it is not outright impossible – of improving the state of their soul, where this means restoring the reasoning apparatus to a state no longer suited to an animal body.

If Timaean cosmology is not to be just a gloomy tale of inexorable decline, then we must suppose Timaeus means it when he suggests it is at least possible for fallen souls to recover themselves. Thinking of the good and bad horses of the Phaedrus (246a-256e) gives us an intuitive picture of what it might mean for an animal to behave more or less rationally.\[29\] And it is, after all, not inconceivable that the „circles of the Same and Different‘ might come to move more regularly within the irregular space allowed them by an elongated skull.

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28 Is it all animals that have misshapen skulls, or only some? Do some, like birds perhaps, have skulls that are not misshapen in such a way that the circles can never run true? Plato does not suggest it; but in the case of other animals – snakes and fish – he gives other reasons why the body most suited to expressing the sort of disorder of soul it has inherited will interfere with the restoration of rationality.

29 See also the Republic’s dogs, Book II, 375a-376c. In both of these cases, Plato is using animals to model characteristics of the human soul. But there is no reason why we should not take that to be revealing to us something of what he thinks of animal lives.
If this is right, then animals should not differ from us by being physically incapable from attaining their proper goal. But there is a closely related way in which we might try to capture the difference.

(A4) Moral responsibility: they cannot be; we can. Perhaps the significant difference between humans and other animals is a difference in moral responsibility, rather than physical possibility. Our bodies, unlike theirs, actually conduce to rational activity; animal bodies merely do not rule out some accomplishment in this direction. Because we are physically endowed in such a way as to readily rectify the disordered activity of rational soul, we are obliged or required to do so. For us to have disorder in the rational part of our soul is a failing in a way it would not be meaningful to say of a horse or snake. For ‘could have done otherwise’ is a much more real possibility for us than for them.

If we stray from perfect reason, it is contrary, we might think, to the natural opportunities provided by bodies such as our own; whereas, if they succeed in becoming more rational, this improvement is contrary to the physical body with which they have been equipped. For us, vice is a choice; for them, it is simply what they were born to.

The problem with cutting the difference this way is that, while it is true that animals cannot be responsible for choosing their continued degraded state, neither can we. We do not choose our bodies any more than they do; and for us, just as for them, most moral failings are grounded, in the Timaeus, in biological or physical flaws. Take lust, for example:

T16: But the truth about sexual overindulgence is that it is a disease of the soul caused primarily by the condition of a single stuff which, due to the porosity of the bones, flows within the body and renders it moist. (Timaeus 86d3-5)

A similar physical basis is described for other diseases of the soul: acid and phlegm and bile cause recklessness, cowardice and stupidity.  

30 About human bodies, Thomas Johansen writes, „By showing how the body is organized so as to maximize rational order we also see that the body may cooperate with reason and need not present an obstacle to rational life. Rather…the body itself can be seen as an instance of good order (kos-mos) …the natural tendency of the soul and the body is towards rational order“ (Plato’s Natural Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004. Chapter 1: What is the Timaeus-Critias About?, p. 19). He does not draw any contrast between human and other animal bodies in this regard.

31 T17: When any of a man’s acid and briny phlegms or any bitter and bilious humours wander up and down his body without finding a vent to the outside and remain pent up inside, they mix the vapour that they give off with the motion of the soul and so are confounded with it. So they produce all sorts of diseases of the soul, some more intense and some more frequent than others. And as they move to the three regions of the soul, each of them produces a multitude of varieties of bad temper and melancholy in the region it attacks, as well as of recklessness and cowardice, not to mention forgetfulness and stupidity. (Timaeus 86e6-87a7)
These physical flaws are not ‘chosen’, and we have no control over them. We are simply born with them, just as the horse is born with an elongated head. The runny marrow that leads to vice may not belong to us in virtue of the kind of animal we are; but it belongs to whatever soul has the misfortune to be tied to such a body, without his wanting it, choosing it, or being able to escape from it. Even the original bodies must have had some such flaws, if souls were to become corrupted and thus to create the rest of the animal world.

But, we might object, this style of accounting for vice only betrays Timaeus’ naturalistic tendencies. There are other, non-physical, sources of moral error and improvement. And indeed even the Timaeus, concerned as it is with naturalist explanations, does not claim that all moral failings come from physical flaws; Timaeus explicitly mentions a second source of moral error: culture. [T18] „A man becomes evil, rather, as a result of one or another corrupt condition of his body and an uneducated upbringing” (Timaeus 86e1-3).

But if choice is what is at issue, this will not help; for we do not choose our upbringing, either. And so it is unsurprising to find Timaeus repeating his own version of the Socratic dictum that no one does wrong willingly. Timaeus’s focus on the physical factors causing bad behaviour is an elaboration, from a particular perspective, of the old Socratic denial of akrasia.

T19: [A] And indeed, just about every type of succumbing to pleasure is talked about as something reproachable, as though the evils are willfully done. But it is not right to reproach people for them, for no one is willfully evil. A man becomes evil, rather, as a result of one or another corrupt condition of his body and an uneducated upbringing. No one who incurs these pernicious conditions would will to have them. (Timaeus 86d5-e4)
[B] that is how all of us who are bad come to be that way – the products of two causes both entirely beyond our control. It is the begetters more than the begotten, that bear the blame for all this. (Timaeus 87b4-6)

We do not choose either our upbringing or our bodies; yet these are the sources of all moral failings. If we are to be held accountable at all, the ground of accountability cannot be ‘choice’ or that some action or character trait was ‘up to us’. 32 Notice how

32 This may mean that the Myth of Er from Republic X is not carrying over into the Timaeus – for according to Er, „Your guardian spirit” and your life „will not be assigned to you, you will choose him…” The responsibility is his who makes the choice, the god has none” (617e1, 4-5). On the other hand, Er’s tale maintains that „The arrangement of the soul was not included” in the sample lives to be chosen between, „because the soul is inevitably altered by the different lives it chooses” (618b2-4) – that is, as Timaeus also says, how vicious or virtuous one is depends upon one’s life, upbringing and circumstances (compare 618e1-2: „He will call worse that [life] which leads to being more unjust, better that which leads it to being more just”). The chooser finds different lives attractive according to his current character („In his folly and greed he chose [a tyrant’s life] without a careful look” (619b7-8); but this folly and greed has likewise been determined by a
Timaeus says it is a mistake to reproach wrong-doers (TI9[A]). In this way, we are in exactly the same position as the naughty horses – we acquire bad souls suitable to a badness which we did not, and would not choose, and which we can do nothing about. For the uneducated person’s lack of education consists precisely in his lack of tools for recognizing and remediying his ignorance; and the physical flaws grounding vice are not the sort that can be fixed. This is why we should not blame wrong-doers. In both cases, it is enough that we are bad, for the appropriately bad consequences to follow. Responsibility either is radically re-understood, or else drops out of the picture entirely.

If there remains any basis for a meaningful difference between us and animals, it will not be found in whether or not we can be responsible for our actions, or what this responsibility amounts to; it will not rest on whether it is within our power to become better than we are. Any meaningful difference can only consist in the modes through which moral degradation and improvement might take place, the sorts of corruptions to which we are vulnerable.

(A5) For we, but not horses and snakes and starfish, can be corrupted by our upbringing or improved by it. Humans have culture, and language with which to learn and to teach one another. And while it is not in my power to determine what sort of culture I am born into; nor is it in my power to determine whether I have a body which interferes fatally with responding appropriately to good influences and avoiding bad ones; still this mode of the inevitable corruption or improvement is one not available to animals.

Timaeus says, in passing, that even though this badness is not our fault, one must [T20] „make every possible effort to flee from badness, whether with the help of one’s upbringing, or the pursuits of studies one undertakes, and seize the opposite. But that is the subject for another speech.“ (Timaeus 87b8-10). Indeed. But we have already seen that it is mere luck whether one has resources from one’s upbringing to overcome societal corruptions; and it will likewise be a matter of temperament – as these are constituted physically, and shaped socially – whether or not one can engage in serious study, or even be moved by Timaeus’ exhortations. It is all very well for Timaeus to say we should „make every possible effort‘; but it is difficult to see what this other speech could say that turned up anything that was in our power to do or avoid. We have language, and so culture, with which to learn and teach one another, with which to corrupt and harm one another; it is out of our power which of these we do, and which we respond to.33

person’s previous life and after-life – „It was pitiful, ridiculous, and surprising. For the most part their choice depended upon the character of their previous life“ (620a1-3).

33 Call this the paradox of Socratic exhortation. We must be encouraged, and encourage each other, to follow virtue and eschew vice; but whether these exhortations move us is out of our hands. Those hear Socrates’ call best who need it least; and he (and we) engage in exhortation knowing this. This marginalisation of self-determination or will is not, I think, due to any inordinate emphasis placed here on physical explanation. What explanation could there be for why some people respond to improving words, while others do not; why some people respond to flattery, and others do not?
The upshot of this exploration is to return us to (A1): there is in practice no real difference between us and other animals.³⁴ One might, reflecting on this, come then to take seriously the vegetarianism practiced in the City of Pigs (Republic II. 372-373). In the truly happy city, the one that is healthy and not ‘feverish’, we would drink wine and eat barley cakes and figs, play with our (not too numerous) children (Republic 275a5-c1), and we would no doubt engage in philosophical discussions in our spare time³⁵ – but we would not eat animals.³⁶ Socrates means it, and Plato does think a truly temperate life, led by understanding of one’s place in the universe, would not include eating animals.³⁷ This is partly because grazing animals require more land, which can only be got by taking it from our neighbours (373d7-10). But the Timaean cosmos suggests another reason: the perfectly happy citizens will not eat animals because their correct understanding of the cosmos involves a recognition of animals as embarked on the very same moral journey as any human being.

Works cited:


³⁴ Although for a recent suggestion, from another context, that this last difference may be the one that makes all the difference, see Matthew Cobb’s review of recent work in evolutionary psychology („Moral Mammals“. Times Literary Supplement, No. 5430. 27 April 2007: 12-13). He concludes that „A final facet of this problem, which anchors the real differences that exist between ourselves and other animals, is that morality is also consciously, deliberately taught by humans, above all to children. This is one particular aspect of our unique teaching behaviour: unlike every other animal, as far as we know, humans teach.“

³⁵ Consider the Statesman’s observation that philosophical discourse makes the difference between a worthwhile and a worthless orderly society (Pol. 272b-d)

³⁶ Notice that when the true (372e6) and „healthy“ city (372e7; 373b3) is enlarged into a luxurious and feverish one (373e3, e8) – the one the Republic is devoted to describing – it is hunters who appear as the first of the unnecessary professions (737b5): „There was no need for [swineherds] in our original state, but we shall want them now; and a great quantity of sheep and cattle too, if people are going to live on meat“ (373e5-8).

³⁷ Agreeing to undertake the task of describing the luxurious city, Socrates still prefers the first, simpler society: „It seems to me that the one that we described before is the true city, the healthy one“ (372e6-7).
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