The Evil Soul in Plato's Laws

Thomas F. Gould

Yale University

Follow this and additional works at: https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp

Part of the Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons, Ancient Philosophy Commons, and the History of Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation

https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/29

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter by an authorized administrator of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.
THE EVIL SOUL IN PLATO'S LAWS

In the tenth book of Plato's *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger, to the profound consternation of most readers, suddenly forces the suggestion on his interlocutors that there are at least two souls, one which accomplishes good and another which has the power to bring about the opposite (286e). The assertion is not qualified by any of the phrases, so familiar to readers of the Dialogues, by which Plato often transforms surprising statements into mere suggestions or temporarily useful hypotheses. In the subsequent pages he clearly labels the second soul (or type of soul, 897b) 'evil' (κακός, 897d), and says that it has neither understanding nor excellence (897b, 898c). What does he mean, some counter World Soul, plotting against the works of Reason, or are we to understand that there are individuals among us inhabited by purely evil souls? The commentators of the last century were divided as to which of these interpretations to accept, but argued in vain, for neither can be well supported from the other writings of Plato.¹ As a result, some scholars took what appeared to be the only other explanation—that Plato did not really mean what he said here.² The disadvantages of this solution are obvious. Neither the dramatic setting, nor the main purpose of this part of the dialogue (a speech to be used for the conversion of atheists), nor yet the particular argument being forwarded (that the soul is prior to 'nature') seems to call for this seemingly drastic departure from Plato's usual opinions.

Most of the more fruitful discussions of the problem have begun with an examination of other passages in the Dialogues—and there are a fairly large number of such passages—where the sources of evil are mentioned—discussed.
Indispensable as some such procedure obviously is, it has not led to a clear solution, simply because these other passages themselves cannot be reconciled with one another. The discussion has usually been reduced to a defense of either the 'Socratic,' the 'material,' or the 'psychic' theory of the origin of evil as the only truly Platonic theory—or at least his final and only mature theory. According to the Socratic theory, evil has no substantial existence, it is only a mistake in perspective; according to the material theory, the perceptible world is the true source of evil; and according to the psychic theory, the source of evil must be looked for in the soul. If we accept only the Socratic theory, then the evil soul cannot be seriously meant. But if the material theory is considered, then perhaps we should search for analogues to the evil soul in the dialogues dealing at greatest length with the world of phenomena, especially the Timaeus. If we accept the psychic theory, on the other hand, then it would seem more fruitful to study the myths of reward and punishment and the various discussions of the tripartite division of the soul. In this dilemma it seems to have escaped notice that the passage on the evil soul in the Laws is itself as clear and specific as any we have. And because it is late and only loosely connected with the wider argument in the dialogue, and above all because it is so oddly technical and capable of interpretation with a minimum of references to other dialogues, this passage, Laws 892d-899d, should be used to throw light on earlier discussions of evil, rather than the other way around.

Let us examine what it says. The assertion which must be demonstrated if the atheist is to be converted is that soul is prior to body (892a-b). The Athenian Stranger emphasizes the need for care in handling these new ideas, and proposes that he answer his own questions through this part of the argument, lest his interlocutors falter in the face of the novelty (892c-893a). After a solemn invocation, he tells what question he would put first to the doubter: are all things standing still, and is nothing in motion? He thereupon launches into a
long and technical classification of the ten kinds of motion (893b-894c). This
is indeed a novel way of approaching the nature of the soul. It is not really
an exhaustive enumeration, nor yet the orderly division by genus and species
which we might have expected from the author of the Sophist and the Politicus.
Rather it is a list of five different dichotomies on five different principles.
First, all motions can be divided as to whether they involve motion in one
place (ἐστὶ) or in more than one. Secondly, the motion of an object which
collides (without suffering a change in its state (ἐξίς)) can be classified as
to whether it results in the division of that object (when it collides with a
single stationary object) or combines with other objects (when it gets between
two, coming from different directions.) Third, the combining process in the
previous dichotomy could be looked upon as increase, and could be contrasted,
not with the possible splitting of one of the colliding objects, but with
divergent motion, resulting in decrease. Fourth, any change of state (ἐξίς)
involves destruction, and this could be set in opposition to genesis. (The
description of genesis here is very complex; it is not, as we might expect,
simply the appearance of a new ἐξίς every time an old one is disturbed.)
And finally, the fifth dichotomy is made according to whether a motion is
self-generated or whether the object's motion is induced from without.

The catalogue, difficult enough because of its compression and unelaborated
references to things worked out elsewhere, is made even more perplexing by
being treated as a straight list, headed by self-generated motion, with induced
motion coming next, and so on. There is obviously a great deal of overlap, and yet, though some of these classifications can be arranged, one under
another in the familiar pattern produced by systematic diacritical scheme for all ten immediately reveals that this is not how the
catalogue was arrived at, either. What Plato has apparently done is to
reproduce all the approaches for classifying motion which he knows, both those
which were already familiar to the Presocratics (translated, to be sure, into the terms of the Timaeus) and some which probably appeared for the first time in his own later dialogues. As we shall see, all of these principles of division have appeared before in Plato's writings, and, with one significant exception, all those which he has used in previous works appear again here. Now, what is the point of presenting so elaborate and technical an account here? Presumably, if a single distinction between two kinds of motion would have been sufficient for the problem at hand, this would have been all that would need to have been drawn from the atheist. This is what happens, for example, at Theaetetus 181 b-e and Phaedrus 245. But the argument in the Laws is going to require two dichotomies of motion, on two different principles. Obviously it would be best if Plato could have shown the relationship between them by an orderly diaeresis according to genus and species. But it would have been impossible to do this using all the principles of division which he recognized, and he was perhaps unwilling to present an analysis of motion which failed to account for some of them and raised further complex problems. For instance: should generation and destruction be species (or sub-species) of self-generated motion, or of induced motion? Anomalies result either way you try it. The next best thing to a complete diaeresis was a comprehensive list of all the divisions of motion which Plato accepted as legitimate.

From here the proof for the priority of the soul proceeds exactly like the proof for its immortality in the Phaedrus (245c-e). Using the last and most important distinction from the catalogue of motions, between self-generating motion and motion induced from without, it is shown first, that the self-generating kind is necessarily 'prior' to the other, and secondly that the self-moving motion is the very definition ($\lambda\nu\gamma\eta\nu\tau\omicron\varsigma$) of the thing which we call 'soul' (Laws 894d-896c). Ergo, the soul is prior to all other things. This is the point at which the 'evil' soul is introduced.
Let us consider for a moment why Plato did not end the argument here. Has he not already destroyed the position of these young atheists? Has he not cleared the soul and its works from all shadow of being derivative (896b-c)?

It has been decided that this was the source (πηγή) of the whole heresy (891c). But there are a good many pertinent questions still unanswered. What is the relationship between soul (ψυχή) and intelligence or reason (νοῦς)? (If our self-generating motion cannot be connected with reason, surely our proof of its superiority to body has gained us nothing.) What is the relationship between soul so defined and the observable arrangement of the world? How does this lead to a belief in the gods? In particular, what is the proof of the primacy of self-generating motion got to do with the reality of the gods of the state, i.e. the sun, the moon, and the rest? Besides, if soul is responsible for all motions, must it not be responsible for evil motions as well as good? These may not be the way the problems presented themselves to Plato; indeed, it is always dangerous to fill in the unwritten reasoning behind a finished work. In any case, however, these are all questions which are in fact answered in the remainder of the argument.

No sooner does the Athenian Stranger triumphantly demonstrate the priority of soul by identifying it with self-generating as opposed to secondary motion, then he states bluntly what appears at first to be a most damaging consequence of his theory (896d). If soul is the cause of all things, then it must be the cause (αἰτία) not only of all good, beautiful, and just things, and the like, but also—and he does not hedge—of all evil (κακία), shameful (αἰσχρό), unjust (ἀδικία) things, and the like. It is necessary, he says, to agree with this (ὁμολογεῖν ἀναγκαῖον) It is indeed, if all motions which were not induced from without are by definition to be attributed to soul. We have no basis for excluding the regrettable motions. Still, it does mean that we can include the heavens or sky (οὐρανός), for it manifestly has its own source of motion. The
Athenian has thus established that the world is controlled (διοικεται by soul. But at what a cost! If we can know no more than this about the soul which controls the universe—that it is the same thing that causes all good and all evil—who will worship the gods or call the heavens the work of intelligence?

We should not be surprised, then, that the Athenian immediately insists that there must be at least two souls, one which accomplishes good (εὐργετικής), and another capable of bringing about the opposite (τάναντια ὑμαιμένη ἔξεργάζεσθαι, 896c). To emphasize the urgent necessity for this distinction, the Athenian spells out the unflattering names which we give to some of the motions by which soul drives (ἀγειν) all things in the heavens, on land, and in the sea. They include false opinion (δοξάζειν ἐψευμένως), grieving (λυπουμένη, SC. κίνησις), fearing (φοβομένη), and hating (μισοῦσα), as well as all their opposites. These are all primary motions (πρωτουργοί)!

Furthermore, with these self-generating motions, soul takes over (or receives, παραλαμβάνω) the secondary motions of bodies (δευτερουργοί κίνησις ὁμάτων) and drives all things to increase, decrease, separation, combination, and ultimately to heat, cold, heaviness, lightness, hard, soft, white, black, bitter, and sweet (897c). Soul thus becomes, not only directly responsible for the passions of the θυμός, but, to a large extent, even for the lamentable flux and deception of Becoming. All this follows when you define soul as self-generating motion. The Timaeus might have led us to expect that Plato would locate the trouble, the possibility for error, at the point where soul must take over the secondary motions of bodies, and thus shift part of the burden away from the soul itself. But he does not do so here.

He continues: soul, in manipulating (χρησθαι) the qualities, manages things so that they are right and fortunate (ὀρθά καὶ εὐδαιμονα παιδαγωγεῖν) only if it enlists the aid of reason (νοῦν προσλαμβάνειν). It can also produce the very opposite results, if it associates with unreason (ἀνοίξα συγγίγνεσθαι). As so often happens, even in Plato's most important theories, his language—
especially his choice of verbs—is highly metaphorical and defies translation into precise terms. Here we are asked to picture soul now enlisting the aid of reason, now associating with unreason. In the Athenian's next statement, however, he speaks of two kinds (γένη) of soul, one wise and full of excellence (φρόνιμον καὶ ἀρετῆς πλοῦτος) the other possessing neither. In the pages which follow it becomes clear that 'to be wise and full of excellence' is exactly equivalent to 'enlisting the aid of reason'. The only sort of soul, therefore, that could work now with reason, now with unreason, is one compounded of both kinds. We know now how we can distinguish the two kinds of soul: by showing how one is fitted to work with reason while the other is not. Then we must prove that it is the reasonable kind that governs the universe, not the other.

This is the crucial step in the argument. And yet Plato handles it exactly as we ought to have expected. He began the discussion on the soul with an exhaustive list of the principles on which motion could be divided into classes, and then used one of these principles to define the soul. Now that he wants to distinguish between two kinds of soul, what could be more natural—even necessary—than that he should again return to the principles on which motion can be divided? Going back to that catalogue, we find that Plato gave special prominence to one of those divisions, and elaborated it at some length (693c-e). The distinction was between things which move in one place (ἀδρα) and things which move in more than one. By motion in one place he means circular motion with a fixed center. The Athenian marvels at the fact that in such cases the same motion is imparted to all parts, but not with the same velocity. The center has no motion at all, and the velocity of the circle which is described at any given point is directly proportional to its radius. Because of the perfect proportions (λόγος) and harmony (μολογείν) discernible in the distribution of these velocities, this kind of motion is the source of all wonders (τῶν θαυμαστῶν ἀπάντων πηγῆ). One might have expected this condition to be impossible (ἀδύνατον ἄν τις ἐλπίσεις γίγνεσθαι πάθος). At
this point the alternative motion, motion in more than one place, is described (893 d).

Returning now to the distinction between the good and the evil soul (897 b, f.) we see the Athenian artfully leading up to his solution by asking which kind of soul is the ruler (ἐγκρατής) of the heavens, the earth, and of the whole circumference (περίοδος). Plato tacitly assumes from this point on that the ὅρμος does in fact move in a circular fashion about a fixed center, and that this needs no defense or demonstration. Whether a Greek audience would find this a perfectly natural assumption or not, it is an idea that was familiar enough to the readers of the Timæus. His procedure now is to ask whether this motion resembles that of reason (νοῦς) or that of unreason or not-reason. (Once more Plato shows his predilection for imprecise language in expressing relationships: he asks if it 'has a similar nature' (ὁμοίαν φύσιν ἔχειν), and 'moves in a kindred manner' (ἐρχεσθαι συγγενῶς).) But here again the Athenian loads his question by asking if the ὅρμος moves like the motion, the reckonings, and the revolution (περισφορά) of reason. If it does, says he, then we shall have proved that it is the best soul (ἀριστή) which takes care (ἐπιμελεῖσθα) of the cosmos.

On the other hand, of course, if its motion is like that of unreason, then another (or the other) soul (or type of soul) must rule the world. The Athenian actually puts it in a different way: if the cosmos moves in a frantic and ἀτάκτως disorderly manner (μαντικῶς τε καί ἀτάκτως), then the evil or poor soul (μακὴ) rules. This sounds as though he were proposing to investigate what the motions of the world actually are; but this is not what he does. What he means is that, assuming the cosmic motion to be circular, we must find out whether circular motion is frantic and disorderly or not. This is, to say the least, a confusing way of stating the problem.

The problem has been reduced to this: is circular motion akin to reason or unreason? One might expect that Plato would now have to describe the nature of reason in order to show how it resembles turning circles. Instead, he takes
the reverse approach: he will investigate the nature of circular motion and see if it is not like reason. To us it might seem more difficult to assume that we already know the nature of reason, and to scrutinize circular motion as the unknown, than to proceed the other way around. Not so for Plato. He apparently assumed, first, that it was self-evident that intelligent activity must be some part or class or aspect of soul. Secondly, he took very seriously his identification of soul as self-generating motion. And third, he believed that correct diaeresis could yield real knowledge. It is not unnatural, therefore, that he should now proceed by looking for a principle for subdividing self-generating motion, and that if he found a principle which gave him subdivisions extremely suggestive of reason and unreason, he would be quite satisfied, or at any rate far more impressed than we might be. Nor did he have far to look. Plato found a way to distinguish reasonable from non-reasonable soul in one of the dichotomies by which he distinguishes soul from not-soul in the Timaeus (Timaeus 34 e-b).

This part of the argument deserves to be reproduced in full (897e-898e):

Athenian Stranger: Do we recall this, from what was said before—that we established that of all things some are in motion, others are stationary?

Clinics: Yes.

Athenian: And that of the things in motion, some move in one place (τόπος), others in more than one?

Clinics: That is so.

Athenian: Now, it is necessary that, of these two motions, the one which moves in one place must always move around some center (or point), being some likeness (μίμημα) of wheels turned on a lathe, and that this motion must be, as completely as possible, the most proper and similar motion to the revolution (περίοδος) of reason.

Clinics: How do you mean?

Athenian: If we should say that they both move in the same respects (κατὰ ταύτα), the same manner (ὅσαν τοῖς), in the same place (ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ), around the same things (περὶ τὰ), in the same direction (πρὸς τὰ
αὐτά 

with one rule or proportion (ἕνα λόγον)\textsuperscript{13} and one order (τάξιν μίαν), reason, I mean, and the motion which moves in one place, both being likened to the motions of a sphere turned on a latitude, then we would not seem to be poor craftsmen of fine images in speech.

Clinias: That is most correct.

Athenian: Well, then, would the motion which never moves in the same manner, nor in the same direction, nor in the same place (ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ), nor around the same things, nor in one place (ἐν ἐνό), nor in an order (κόσμῳ), nor in an arrangement (πάξιμο), nor in any proportion—would this motion be akin to all unreason (ἄνοιας ἀπάσης συγγενῆς)?

Clinias: That would be most true.

Athenian: Now indeed there is no longer any difficulty in saying expressly that, since, on the one hand,\textsuperscript{14} the thing which drives around all things in our world is soul, and since, on the other hand, we must say that either the best soul or the opposite of necessity drives around the circular motion (περιπορά) of the ourenos, taking care of it and ordering it—

Clinias: Stranger!\textsuperscript{15} Surely from what has now been said it would be impious to say anything but that the soul—or souls—which contain all excellence drive this around!

Athenian: You have attended my arguments most splendidly, Clinias.

From this point, the Athenian has no trouble in demonstrating that the individual heavenly bodies, like the world as a whole, must also be energized somehow by souls of the rational sort.\textsuperscript{16}

Where now is the evil soul? Though a further account of it is not needed for the purposes of his argument here, Plato has left us almost as full a description as of the better kind of soul:

1. It is soul, and therefore self-generating motion.
2. It is akin not to reason but to not-reason, and therefore must be self-
generating motion not in one place but in more than one place.

3. In the catalogue of motions (893d-e) there appears the following account of motion in more than one place: "things which move by locomotion (φορη), always changing their position from one place to another; and this happens both when they have single points of support (lit. the support of some one point, i.e. when the same side of the object touches the ground or floor throughout the movement, as in sliding), and when they have more than one (sc. point), by rolling around (περικυλινδῆτοσαί)." In other words, any motion but stationary rotation.

4. This kind of motion is by nature without any order or proportion, and can be styled frenetic and planless.

5. This self-generating motion in more than one place is the source of all the works which the Athenian has attributed to soul but which are yet not according to reason, such as opinion (or at least false opinion), grieving, fearing, and hating, and it must be the cause of all the bad, shameful, and unjust things in the cosmos, including, in part at least, the processes and qualities of Becoming, such as increase, decrease, bitter, and sweet.

No interpretation of the 'evil' soul which does not account for these five facts can hope to stand.

The evil soul is mentioned a second time in the tenth book of the Laws, a few pages further on, where the belief is combatted that the gods do not care for men. The Athenian attempts to demonstrate that the world is so arranged that every part (μέρος), as far as possible, does and experiences what is proper for it, and in this way invariably benefits the whole (903b). The great Draughts-player, of course, does not actually make some men better and others worse; this would make him the author of evils. But a soul is forever undergoing changes through its own agency (ὅτι διὰ ψυχῆς) or that of another soul, so that the Draughts-player merely raises to a better place (τόπος) the character (ηθος) which has
become better and relegates to a worse place that which has become worse (903d). According to the earlier passages which we have examined, the only soul which can act sometimes well (with reason) and sometimes badly (with unreason), is one which is compounded of both the reasonable and the unreasonable kind. By 'character', then, Plato must here mean the whole soul of any individual, including some of each kind, and by 'better' he must mean one which is more completely ruled by the reasonable kind within it. Only a few sentences later the Athenian reiterates once more that the good part of the soul always, by nature, does good, and the bad the opposite; neither alone, therefore, can easily grow better or worse.

He goes on (904a): since our King saw (1) that all activities involve soul (ἐν ψυχῷ εἶναι ἂν πράξεις ἀπάσαι) (2) that there is much excellence in them (i.e. in the activities of soul), but also much evil, (3) that body and soul are each indestructible even though they are not combined forever as in the case of the gods,17 and that (4) as much of the soul as is good (ἐσόν άγαθόν ψυχής) always by its nature helps, while as much as is bad (κακόν) harms—"since he saw all these things he contrived where each of the parts (ἐκάστων τῶν μέρων) should be placed so that it would most thoroughly, easily, and successfully provide for the victory of excellence and the defeat of evil in the whole." Now it has always been assumed that the Athenian is here talking about the distribution of good and bad human souls throughout the cosmos. But it is more natural, both from the immediate context and from all that we know about the soul, to assume that he is talking about the good and bad kinds within each individual human soul. Part of what he says here is actually a recapitulation of the earlier argument: since all motions are caused by soul, and since some motions are good, some bad, (therefore there must be a good kind of soul and a bad kind;) and since the human soul, though it eventually leaves the body, does not itself decompose (into its parts), and since that part of the soul
which is good (or rational) always by its nature does good, while the bed harms, he devises where (in the body) he may locate the various parts in order that good (or reason) will triumph most often.

The Athenian continues: "Indeed, so that all this may come about, he has devised what sort of seat (ἐδώρα) and what regions (τόποι) a part of a certain sort must always take and inhabit (οἶκίς ἐσθαί) when it comes to be (γιγνομένον)." The word *gignomenon* may mean 'at birth', or it may refer to a continuous process of becoming, like *genesis* in the next sentence. Notice that on the traditional interpretation of the passage, *gignomenon* would paradoxically have to refer to the moment that a man dies. The word *hedra*, *topoi*, and *oikizesthai* may remind us of the description of the after life of human souls in the *Timaeus* (repeated and elaborated a few sentences farther on in the *Laws*), but in the part of the *Timaeus* where the distribution of the parts of the soul is related (69d ff.), we find here too the word *katoikizein* used more than once to describe the 'housing' of the various kinds of soul in various parts of the body. In that passage, also, it is shown exactly how the housing of the parts of the soul in various regions allows 'the best to be leader among them all' (τὸ βέλτιστον ἐν αὐτοῖς πᾶσιν ἴγνωμονεῖν, *Timaeus* 70 b). The Athenian next says: "But the causes of the *genesis* (αἰτία: γένεσις) of any particular kind he left to the wills of each of us." Or turning the sentence around, the wills of each of us are (or contain) the causes of the coming-to-be of each particular kind of soul. But our wills cannot be the causes of the *origin* of each kind. On the traditional interpretation of the passage, *genesis*, like *gignomenon*, would have to refer to the death of the individual, at which time he is assigned his place in the cosmos. *Genesis* is more likely a continuous process of becoming, a rare but not un-Plethonic use of the word, chosen to balance with *gignomenon*.
in the sentence before: the King is responsible for the place where each soul comes-to-be, but our own wills contain the causes of this coming-to-be. A little later on (904c) the Athenian apparently uses the phrase 'cause of change' (αἰτία μεταβολῆς) as a conscious echo of the 'causes of becoming.'

The next sentence reads: "For, almost every time, virtually every one of us becomes the sort of person we are according to the tendency of our will (or desire, ἐπιθυμεῖν) and the state of our soul when so desiring (καὶ ὁποῖος τις ὅν τὴν ψυχήν)." In more familiar terms, our desires (irrational motions) can determine how our whole complex souls and the various parts develop, even though the King has placed the parts in the most advantageous arrangement, because an irrational desire is capable of usurping the place of the reason in an imperfectly trained soul; and such usurpations can have a lasting effect on the harmony and justice among the parts of the soul.

This, then, is the way the whole passage goes: the Athenian, after stating that each soul is forever becoming worse or better through its own fault and that of other souls, and that the Draughts-player merely moves them up and down after death according to their merits (903d), described why the soul and not the Draughts-player is responsible for the improvements or degeneration (904 a-c): souls are by nature sources of motion; the fact that there are both good and bad motions proves the existence of good and bad kinds of souls, each tending to produce motions according to its nature; the fact that animals continue to be born and there is no end of their generation proves that the human soul does not decompose after its separation from body; therefore, the Draughts-player cannot simply do away with the bad motions and must do the next best thing, which is to so arrange the good and bad parts so that the good has the best chance of dominating the bad in every case; thus if the
arrangement is not preserved to the best advantage during life, it can be
said that the sources of this change are the spontaneous notions of the worse
part of the soul. His next sentence is, "therefore (τοινυν), on the one
hand, all things change which are possessed of soul, having in themselves the
cause of change (αἰτία μεταβολῆς), and, on the other hand, while they are
changing they are moved according to the order and law of destiny (εἰμαρμένη).
Now, since it has been fully explained why human souls, not the Draughts-player,
contain the source of any change which they may undergo, the law according
to which the Draughts-player moves them up and down is described at great
length (904c-905c).

It will be seen that the key phrase is 'since he saw that all actions
involve soul, and that there is both much good and much bad in them' (904a).
Since, that is, the irrational soul is self-generating motion, and yet is
not the same as that of the rational soul. The one thing that this passage
adds to our previous information is that Plato has identified the irrational
parts of the human soul as the most obvious, and perhaps even the only
instances of this 'self-generating motion in more than one place.'21

One more passage gives us some information on the 'evil soul' (906 a ff.).
Here the third heresy is being combatted—that the gods can be bribed. For
this purpose, all deities are compared to guardians and helpers in disease
and battle. "For, since we have agreed among ourselves that the υράντος is
full of many good things, and also of things of the opposite sort, but of
more of the things which are not (sc. good), such a battle, we assert, is
never ending and requires a wonderful watchfulness, and the gods, with the
dæmones also, are our allies and we are the possessions of the gods and
dæmones; and injustice and ὑβρίς, with folly (αφροσύνη), destory us, while
justice and prudence, with understanding (φρονσία), save us, things which
dwell in the soul powers (ἐμπυγχο: δινάμεις) of the gods, and some small
bit of the things of this sort one might see dwelling clearly in us here also."
We have indeed admitted twice that there are both good and bad things in the world (though not, except perhaps by implication, that the evil outran the good). The statements here agree with our previous information, (1) that the souls which are gods are all good and work with reason (here 'understanding', φρόνησις ), (2) that we have some good soul in each of us, and (3) our souls also have the power to work with unreason (here 'folly, ὑφροσύνη'). But up to now, we have had no very strong indication about the location and identification of irrational souls except in the complex make-up of human souls. But when the whole ouranos is pictured as a battle ground for the two kinds of soul, one wonders if Plato could really have meant that the irrational motions originating in men (and animals) account for the colossal strife in the skies and over the face of the earth. That what we call 'natural catastrophes' are to Plato instances of the effect of irrational motions is hinted at a few sentences farther on (906c), and where it is suggested by the way that a plague (λοιμός) is a usurpation or encroachment (πλεονεξία) in the seasons like an unjust act of a man. Are there sources of irrational motion which bear a relationship to the gods and the World Soul analogous to that of our irrational souls to our reasonable souls? If there are, there is this one important difference: the world soul is never conquered by the irrational motions, as often happens in individuals. In any case, it is important to notice that these irrational sources can never, by definition, be intelligences or an intelligence.

The 'evil soul,' therefore, cannot refer to anything which is not soul, such as matter or Forms, nor to purely evil individuals among us (though men can be called 'evil' whose bestial parts have grown uppermost, 906 b-c), nor to a Devil World Soul, nor yet to some irrational streak in the make-up of the rational revolutions of the heavens. It is a kind of soul: it is a subdivision of self-generating motion. It is irrational: it does not move in the marvelous whirl of the divine-soul. It is the irrational element in the sources of
motion of all things which have life—which most certainly include all animals, and may include more. It is self-generating motion in more than one place wherever such motion is found.

It is not difficult to understand why the notion of evil soul as 'self-generating motion in more than one place' has not been immediately seized upon and understood. It seems like a thoroughly bizarre and unedifying idea, and, though we are used to quaint and curious theories in Plato's physical speculations, we somehow expect something grander from the great philosopher when he turns to a theme like the nature and origin of evil. Clearly, this definition of the evil soul requires more explanation, for we must show that it is not an utterly mad or contemptible theory in itself, and that it is closely connected with Plato's other writings on the subject of evil.

There are two things which have probably prevented many people from accepting immediately the obvious meaning of Plato's words. First, there is the choice of the name Evil (or Bòò, or, to a less extent mel) which unfortunately suggests wicked, perverse, or at least contrary intelligence, while Plato is clearly referring to a force without any plan or any intelligence. The word Hake is used of this soul (or type of soul) only twice; and inasmuch as the other appellations and descriptions all divest it of any willful or scheming nature, perhaps we ought to translate this as 'poor' or 'virtue-less' (897 b-c). To be sure, the effects of this motion are bad at least part of the time, but it itself is regularly referred to in negative terms: spontaneous motion that has no plan, motion which has only the capability of producing bad results.

Secondly, it is very difficult to realize fully how seriously Plato took his physical explanations of what we would call non-physical phenomena. Many people have noted, and even explored at great length, the great emphasis
which Plato puts on the study of motion and moving things in his later works. Yet it is one thing to be aware of this, and quite another really to think in his terms whenever we come to a detail which needs explanation. In the Timaeus, for instance, commentators have argued long and in vain over the passage describing musical consonance (80 a-b), not realizing how neatly it can be worked out if only we remember that the soul is always pictured as a revolving sphere. Most of us would agree with Aristotle (De anima 407c) that Plato ought not to have had so spacial a notion of the soul, but the important fact is that he did, and he took it seriously. So here in the Laws the rational soul is likened to a ball turned on a lathe, spinning in one location (898b) and that image must be taken very seriously, for it represents what the human soul had in common with the cosmic vortex. Plato said that it was the motion itself in both cases that originated all tendencies toward order.

Let us see how the doctrine in the Laws may be connected with Plato’s other works. Since the source of evil is defined in the Laws as a kind of motion, we must trace Plato’s remarks both on evil and on motion. We find that both subjects have occupied him throughout his life, and that he has made a long series of different suggestions concerning each, sometime connecting the two subjects, sometimes not. It will be easier to make sense of these comments if we assume that Plato’s views developed, that he was interested in these problems in their own right and was always looking for better solutions—even though he may not always have meant all previous suggestions to be discarded.

With regard to motion, we see two conflicting notions recurring again and again. First, it is the very essence of the superiority of Being to Becoming that the latter is forever in motion while the former is not, for it is because Becoming is in motion that it is unknowable and unreal. (Republic 485 a-b, Phaedo 78c-79c, Symposium 207d-208b, the entire Theaetetus, Sophist 249b, Timaeus 52a, 27d-29d.) On the other hand, soul and intelligence surely
must belong among the things that really are, and soul is synonymous with life and is therefore the very source of motion. (Cratylos 397d ff., Phaedo 98b ff., Republic 353d, Phaedrus 245, Timaeus 36e, 37b, etc.). And if we should wonder whether Plato really saw the paradox here, there is this statement in the Sophist (248e-249e):

But by Zeus, look here! Shall we really be so easily persuaded that neither motion nor thought is to be found among the things that really are, nor yet life itself, nor thinking, but that it stands solemn and holy and motionless forever, having no intelligence?

Thus it is, perhaps, that Plato came to look for a criterion to distinguish the admirable from the regrettable kind of motion.

In his earliest and most basic notions about evil, also, Plato had a conflict. Evil results had always to be guarded against whenever the soul came into contact with the sensible world of bodies, and if the soul could be spared this contact, there would be no evil. (Phaedo 66c, 67e, 79ff., 83, 94e, Republic 611, Cratylos 403e, Politicus 272e, Timaeus 42 a-b, 88 a-b, 86.) On the other hand, each soul is responsible for overcoming as far as possible the dangers lurking in Becoming, and the separated soul after death is rewarded or punished according to its success. (Republic 353 d-e, 444 d-e, 617 e, Sophist 227d ff., Timaeus 42 b-d). Thus it is, perhaps, that Plato came to look for a criterion to distinguish the admirable from the regrettable part or kind or aspect of soul.

Apparently Plato did not at first think in terms of solving these two problems together. In the Phaedrus (245) he found a very elegant criterion for distinguishing two kinds of motion by equating soul with self-generating motion and identifying all other motions as secondary. With this distinction
he was even able to prove soul's priority and immortality. But we are also given to understand in this dialogue that there is a dangerous black horse tied to our souls, which is as immortal as any other part of the soul (246). Otherwise, how could the soul be punished after death for its failures in life? Self-generating motion as such, then, could be the cause of either good or evil, as the Athenian Stranger was later to point out. From this definition nothing could be concluded as to the goodness and rationality of the world-governing spirit.

Plato seems at first to have decided that the self-moving mover should be exonerated from the blame for evil motions. The ruling divinity, at least, whatever its connection be with the World Soul, must be the cause of good only. In this belief, Plato never wavered. (Republic 379 c, Politicus 273 c-d, Timaeus 29e-30a). In the myth in the Politicus (269 ff.), the Eleatic Stranger suggests that were the deity's hand to be taken away from the world, it would stop spinning in its usual course, and its own bodily nature or force (σωματικός, σύμφωνος ἐνθύμια) would cause it to spin in the opposite direction. He adds that in this reverse turning, there is more and more disorder introduced into the universe. This may be adequate for the purpose of the dialogue, but, as Plato himself warns, it suggests some rather misleading things about the source of the non-divine motion (269e-270c). Furthermore, there is nothing about spinning in one direction to suggest why it should be more order-producing or rational or regular or everlasting than spinning in the opposite way.

In the Timaeus, Plato alters his theory in a way that was destined to have far-reaching effects over many centuries: he decided that circular motion is superior by nature to non-circular, or rectilinear motion. Everyone knows how deeply this impressed Aristotle, and that it was not until Galileo and
Newton reversed this judgement, calling rectilinear the only natural motion, and assuming that it was the circular motions which needed explanation, that modern physics got underway. We cannot be sure what first led Plato to seek his solution in this distinction—there may have been earlier notions about soul-circles, or perhaps he was influenced by the attempts of geometers to limit their mechanical tools to compass and straightedge. Already in the Republic (436) and in the Parmenides (138b-d) he had noted some of the paradoxical aspects of this kind of motion. But most suggestive of all, surely, was the dine of the Presocratics, the whirlpool action which was used to explain so well why the cosmos is ordered as it is. Soul, then, so long as it was free from, or dominant over, the sensible world, was always not only self-generating, but also circular, whereas all other motions were induced and rectilinear (34a, 43a-b, 46d-e). Thus Plato not only had a proof of soul's priority, as in the Phaedrus, but also—by showing how it and it alone had the marvelous properties of the dine—a proof of its order-producing power.

Yet this solution left him with even more problems. All non-rational motion is (1) induced, and (2) rectilinear. Is either one of these propositions quite convincing?

First, if the rational soul is the ultimate cause for all motion, will it not be the cause of evils as well as good? There are strong reasons for believing that Plato saw this difficulty. For one thing, to avoid the embarrassment of having the World Soul introduce the flux and failings of the sensible world, he is forced to suggest, very illogically, that the world body was already jogging about before it was given a soul (52d, ff.), and also to speak vaguely of a 'Necessity' which is or contains a 'Wandering Cause,' and the like (47e ff.). Also it is very interesting to discover that in the
Laws Plato stated the problem bluntly and offered a change in his cosmology which solved the difficulty neatly. And there is another problem created by the definition of soul in the Timaeus: if all non-rational motion is also secondary, the non-rational parts of any human soul will also necessarily be secondary, and therefore mortal. He admits that this is so (69d,f, 89e, and cf. 77c). Although he does not try to reconcile this with his insistence that the souls are punished after death, he does repeat the old Socratic dictum that no one does wrong willingly, and dwells on the many opportunities for corruption from trainers and bodily ills (44 b-c, 86d-e). But by the new definition of soul in the Laws, the irrational parts of the soul can once more be shown to survive with the rational, so that the soul's responsibility for its own failings is once more clear and unequivocal.

Secondly, is the opposite of circular motion really rectilinear motion (or as he puts it, 'the six wandering motions,' sc. up, down, forward, backward, right, and left, 34a)? Aristotle accepted this, or a variation of it, but Plato, at least while he was writing the tenth book of Laws, apparently found a difficulty here. The world about us is full of curved motion. Is there really something about a rolling object, for instance, which is more rational than a sliding one? Or is it only in the vortex motion that regularity and ordering properties are discernible? The dichotomy could be rephrased quite satisfactorily: motion in one place or motion in more than one. If one left out qualitative change (ἀλλοιωτικός), as being in reality only locomotion of particles, then there would be left only the διό as in the class of motions in one place.

It is not suggested that this is necessarily an exact description of the genesis of Plato's theory of the evil soul in the Laws. It is sufficient that the theory can be satisfactorily explained as the result of considerations
which have appeared many times before in Plato's writings. Inasmuch as the
theory occurs in Plato's last dialogue, however, and because it is so detailed
and technical, something might be gained by working back from it and asking
ourselves why it may be that he was dissatisfied with his own earlier treat-
ments of the same problem. And perhaps it is not without significance that
it is only by such a procedure that we can understand why Plato should call
self-generating motion in more than one place the 'evil soul.'

To summarize, the 'evil' soul in the Laws is our old friend, the lower
part or parts of the tripartite soul, described now for the first time in
such a way as to show exactly what it shares with the rational soul, and
exactly what it has in common with the sensible world. By defining this type
of soul as 'self-generating motion in more than one place' it can be demon-
strated that, like the rational soul, it is prior to body, capable of
surviving death, and is the ultimate cause of some actions and changes, yet,
like body, has in itself no order or proportion and is thus capable of pro-
ducing evil results. In other words, the tenth book of the Laws asserts nothing
about this kind of soul which was not mentioned in one or another of the other
dialogues; it is new only in its elegant physical formulation. In addition,
Plato may just possibly have decided that there were spontaneous sources of
irrational motions in nature outside of animal souls; if so, then the type
called the 'evil' soul might also fulfill the function of the shaking Receptacle
and the Wandering Cause in the Timaeus.
Notes

1. The only certain reference to the evil soul outside the Laws is Epinomis 989e, which is a brief, uninformative summary of the argument in the Laws. On the supposed identification of the evil soul with the Other in the World Soul of the Timaeus, see Gregory Vlastos, 'The Disorderly Motion in the Timaeus,' Classical Quarterly 33 (1939) p. 78.

2. References to the earlier writings on the subject may be found in the commentary by Karl Steinhardt in Muller's translation Platon's sämtliche Werke, (Leipzig, 1850-66) VII a, (1859) p. 315. See also Eduard Zeller, Die Philosophie der Griechen, (Leipzig, 1922) II a, p. 765 n. 5. The dispute goes back at least as far as Plutarch, de animae procreatione in Timaeo.

3. See Harold Cherniss, 'The Sources of Evil According to Plato,' Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, 98 (1954) pp. 23-30, where references to more recent literature may also be found.

4. For two very different ways of accounting for all three theories, see Cherniss, op. cit., and E. R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951) pp. 207 ff.

5. These two motions are elaborately described. We shall examine these descriptions later.

6. In the terms of the Timaeus, change of hexis presumably means the break-up of the particles into their triangles, as opposed to mere local shifts.

7. A distinction between alloiosis and phora appears at Theaetetus 181 b-c and Parmenides 138 b-d. But either alloiosis must be 'motion in one place,' or it is really locomotion of parts and so not a true opposite of phora. As we shall see later, Plato had good reason to reserve 'motion in one place' for something quite different from alloiosis.

8. In addition, two more of these pairs reappear at 897 a, though they are not essential to the argument. Destruction and generation are the only ones which do not appear again at all. But cf. Laws XII 966e, where soul is said to take over genesis.


10. See note 8 above.

11. Cf. Laws IX, 863b, where the Athenian casually leaves it open as to whether the thymos is a pathos or a meros of the soul. We shall see that like the Republic and the Phaedrus, but unlike the Timaeus, the Laws invariably assumes that the 'parts' of the human soul are indissolubly joined.
12. ÆS; cf. J. D. Denniston, The Greek Particles (Oxford, 1954) p. 238. Bury destroys the logic of the sentence by emending anagke to the deitive and interpreting the infinitive as still dependent on memmemetha. Clinias' response indicates that the Athenian is saying something which has not been said before.

13. Various editors have added keth' or ane.


15. Cf. Denniston, op. cit., pp. 22f

16. There is a problem here. How is the motion of any particular ster-soul 'motion in one place'? It must be considered as part of the World Soul, as in the Timaeus, for only a ring or sphere in which it is imbedded could have this motion. Yet this is not among the three suggestions here.

17. Cf. England, ad loc. The argument is this: body and soul are not together forever, but each must be indestructible or the continued births of animals would stop. We are apparently to understand that the soul is a permanent unity and that the King is not responsible for the bad motions in it. He can arrange them in the body, but if he separated the good and bad parts or aspects, the human soul would no longer exist. The rational part would perhaps be indistinguishable from divinity, etc.

18. On the traditional interpretation, this phrase would have to be equivalent to 'as many souls as are good.'

19. See also the even more suggestive passage at Timaeus 89e, where it says that the soul is 'housed' in us in three parts, and each has its motions.

20. At Laws XII, 966 e, Genesis is defined as everflowing being (δεῖνας οὐδείν), and at 906a, farmers are said to await fearfully the usual difficult seasons peri phytos genesis. Cf. also Philebus 54e, hosa genesis existi. The meaning of genesis at Laws 903c is also doubtful.

21. That Plato thought of the lower souls as sources of spontaneous motion is clearly shown by Philebus 35d and Timaeus 89e.


23. The most extensive, though certainly not the best, is J. B. Skemp, the Theory of Motion in Plato's Later Dialogues (Cambridge, 1942). Plato's conflicting attitudes toward motion are analyzed by P. H. DeLacy, The problem of Causation in Plato's Philosophy, Classical Philology 34 (1939) pp. 97-115. Friedrich Solmsen, in Plato's Theology (Ithaca, 1942) studies the 'Philosophy of Movement,' pp. 75 ff. Noteworthy also are the many writings by F. M. Cornford on Plato, and M. Gueroult, Le Xe livre des Lois et la derniere forme de le physique platonienne, Revue des études grecques 37 (1924) pp. 27-78.

24. Perhaps, too, if Plato has so literal a picture of the soul as regular motion, racing along, we should consider Winckelmann's orthos theousa, for the impossible orthos theous of the MSS at 897 b.

25. Cf. Skemp, op. cit. pp. 36-51, also 83.

Mathematik, 'Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Mathematik, Abteilung 13 Studien, Band 3, Heft 3' (1936) pp. 287-369

27. In the Timaeus, however, the circular motion of the World Soul has little of the ordering to do. It may well be that the everlasting regularity of this kind of motion was more important to Plato. Solmsen, op. cit. pp. 86 ff., makes a good case for this, suggesting that its circular motion puts the soul between sameness and change, and therefore between Being and Becoming.

28. Assuming that Aristotle, not the Academy, was right in interpreting the creation literally.