

**LIVING AS IF THERE WERE GODS  
EVIL AND PHILOSOPHY IN PLATO<sup>1</sup>**

**VIVER COMO SE EXISTISSEM DEUSES:  
O MAL E A FILOSOFIA EM PLATÃO**

**JOÃO EMANUEL DIOGO**

CECH, IEF – Universidade de Coimbra

[joaoediogo@gmail.com](mailto:joaoediogo@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5324-6800>

Texto recebido em / Text submitted on: 16/10/2024

Texto aprovado em / Text approved on: 19/11/2024

**Abstract**

Plato does not see the theme of evil as a central theme. For this reason, we do not find a systematic and comprehensive answer. Rather it seems to be configured as a necessity: answering the question of evil only as an element of the sensitive world, having no relevance to the real world (the world of ideas). Thus, starting from the reading of *Theaetetus* 176a-177a, we will seek to find the details of the Platonic vision that allow us to identify the notion of κακός as a supplement to the notion of the sensible world and, in contrast, with the good (ἀγαθός). The first notion to emphasize is that evil is neither a matter of destiny nor a divine creation. Evil appears as an imperfection, a lack, an ignorance, an absence of good. Good and evil, despite not having the same essence, and this being above all absence,

---

<sup>1</sup>This work is financed with National Funds through the Portuguese FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., within the project UIDB/00196/2020. The reflection that served as the basis for this article and was, in part, presented at the V International Congress of Greek Philosophy that took place at the Faculty of Arts of Coimbra on the 27th, 28th and 29th June 2024.

still leads Plato to a kind of Manichaeism *avant la lettre*, where the bad join the bad (κακοὶ κακοῖς συνόντες, *Tht.*, 177a) and true philosophers, who must seek to live like a god.

**Keywords:** Evil, Plato, absence of good

### Resumo

A temática do mal não é vista como um tema central na obra de Platão. Daí que não encontremos uma resposta sistemática e abrangente nos seus escritos. Antes parece configurar-se como uma necessidade responder à pergunta do mal apenas enquanto elemento do mundo sensível, não tendo qualquer relevância para o mundo real (o mundo das ideias). Assim, partindo da leitura de *Teeteto* 176a-177a, procuraremos encontrar os detalhes da visão platónica que nos permitem identificar a noção de κακός como suplemento da noção de mundo sensível e, em contraposição, com o bem (ἀγαθός). A primeira noção a sublinhar é que o mal não é nem uma questão de destino nem uma criação de ordem divina. O mal aparece como uma imperfeição, uma falta, uma ignorância, uma ausência do bem. O bem e o mal, apesar de não terem a mesma essência, e de este último ser sobretudo ausência, ainda leva Platão a uma espécie de maniqueísmo *avant la lettre*, no qual os maus se juntam aos maus (κακοὶ κακοῖς συνόντες, *Theaetetus*, 177a) e os verdadeiros filósofos devem procurar viver como um deus.

**Palavras-chave:** Mal, Platão, ausência de bem

Ἄλλ' οὐτ' ἀπολέσθαι τὰ κακὰ δυνατόν, ὃ Θεόδωρε – ὑπεναντίον γάρ τι τῷ ἀγαθῷ ἀεὶ εἶναι ἀνάγκη (*Tht.*, 176a)

## 1. Perspective

Writing about such a broad subject and such a prolific and talked-about author always carries a crossroads. Is descriptive, explanatory, or exhaustive stronger than perspective, opinionated, or disruptive? The choice for the first hypothesis is the safest. However, the second seems to us to be more fruitful, because it's from here that a different perspective from the common commentary can emerge. This has led me to slightly alter the title I had thought of for the article, even though one and the other may be consistent with what follows. If the first proposal indicates *living as if you were a god*, as Plato wrote, I changed it to a more prosaic *living as if there were gods*, which implies my interpretation, which like any other, is only an approximation to the author. Or as Socrates told us in the *Republic*:

οὐ γὰρ δὴ ἐγωγέ πω οἶδα, ἀλλ' ὅπῃ ἂν ὁ λόγος ὥσπερ πνεῦμα φέρῃ, ταύτη ἰτέον (*Rp*, 394d)<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. Philosophical hagiography: separation of myth and rationality

If there were a list of saints within philosophy, Plato would surely be the greatest. Time and time again we find a careful hagiography that goes from the “inventor” of philosophy to a long interpretation, reinterpretation, and deconstruction of Platonic texts, to the man who recently appeared in big headlines in the news: Plato’s last night was boring - and it was the philosopher himself who said so, CNN revealed in May<sup>3</sup>. If Philodemus and a recently deciphered manuscript are to be believed, it seems that the Thracian slave, who had been asked to play for the dying philosopher, lacked rhythm and was dismissed by a grumbling Plato: it wasn’t enough to have to die and on top of that the slave had no rhythm! There you have it: one evil never comes alone.

However, Plato does not see the theme of evil as central<sup>4</sup>. That’s why we don’t find a systematic and comprehensive answer. Rather it seems to be a necessity to answer the question of evil only as an element of the sensible world, having no relevance to the real world, the world of ideas. The centrality of the good, of the knowledge of the good (ἀγαθός), is what transforms man into the virtuous, as Socrates says:

ἐπει ὅτι γε ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα μέγιστον μάθημα, πολλάκις ἀκήκοας, ἢ δὴ καὶ δίκαια καὶ ἄλλα προσχρησάμενα χρήσιμα καὶ ὠφέλιμα γίνεται (*Rp*, 505a)<sup>5</sup>.

But the vision of the Greek “miracle” (as an invention of philosophers, and the greatest of them all, Plato)<sup>6</sup> as an almost absolute separation of understanding of the human condition, some naive and disposable, and others, like the Platonic one, rational and impressive, is still making its way

<sup>2</sup> “But we have set sail, and must go where the wind, or the argument, blow us” (Plato 2003: 83).

<sup>3</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/04/30/style/plato-herculaneum-papyrus-scrolls-intl-scli-scn/index.html> (accessed 14 October 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Chilcott 1923: 27.

<sup>5</sup> “You’ve often heard me say that the most important branch of study is the form or character of the good – that which just thing and anything else must make use of if they are to be useful and beneficial” (Plato 2003: 210).

<sup>6</sup> On the relationship between Hellenic philosophy and the ‘barbarian philosophies’ see Bidez & Cumont 2007 (reprint of the 1938 edition): 102 ss.

today. We keep hearing it. Identifying the beginning of philosophy with the beginning of Greek philosophy is an error of analysis and necessarily leads to errors of interpretation. The differentiation between *mythos* and *logos*, between a certain *naivety* in the vision of reality that some still call magical, and a kind of *rationality* that is now properly rational (allow me the ironic pleonasm), is now outdated. As Buxton tells us, “would it not then be preferable, instead of speaking of a ‘shift’, to think in terms of a constant to-ing and fro-ing between the mythical and the rational?”<sup>7</sup> Even so, this positioning is, in terms of analysis, a separation:

But even ‘to-ing and fro-ing’ implies the independent and identifiably separable existence of the terms between which the alleged oscillation takes place. In other words, it confers respectability on ‘the mythical’ and ‘the rational’ as analytical tools. But how far are they respectable? If we acquiesce in their adoption, have we not already begged one of the central questions that any investigation into the ancient Hellenic world ought to regard as problematic?<sup>8</sup>

This question is important because the interpretation of Platonic texts cannot fail to emphasize the constant passage through *myth* and *logos*, which are often indistinguishable. After all, contrary to naivety, *myths* carry the same questions as philosophy. Even the socio-political responses are increasingly part of an interpretation of the human condition that seeks to deal with all aspects of that condition. It’s no coincidence, it should be emphasized, that Platonic theories were quickly accepted and passed on by religions. Accepted and transmitted from the outset by St Paul’s reading of Christianity, throughout the philosophy and theology of the Western Middle Ages, and its first climax, St Augustine. The consequences (largely negative) on the socio-political reality of so-called Western societies are yet to be seen. This influence remains even on those who, we might think, would be safe from any cave. To quote a recent book:

Life is full of symbolic caves. We get stuck in one every time we accept the superficial, the thoughtless. Even if we don’t share the Platonic idea of a solar world made up of unequivocal truth and absolute consensus, we can share their suspicion of the shadow of illusion.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Buxton 2001: 5.

<sup>8</sup> Buxton 2001: 6.

<sup>9</sup> Erlich 2024: 41.

### 3. Rational separation: appearance and truth

This is perhaps the Platonic genius: the more or less rational transformation of a vision that was already on mythologies and religions, that there is a separation, let's say a radical one, between appearance and truth. Put like that, it could even be considered sensible. As my grandmother used to say about films: "It's just tape running", referring not only to the cinematographic mechanism but also emphasizing the transitory nature of the appearance of reality. As the "film", runs, the "appearance" quickly disappears, giving way to reality. It would be like an ancient wisdom, if it weren't for Plato adding that appearance was, after all, life itself, the matter of which we are made, the body, etc. Plato thus defines two ontological worlds: the intelligible world, that of ideas and the soul, and the sensible world, of matter and the body (*Phd.*, 79a).

After all, ignorant, thoughtless, or superficial people, are these slaves of shadows, limited to the sensible world, incapable of even asking themselves what they lack if they don't even know what they lack.

The intelligible world is *a priori* or pre-existent to the sensible world, presenting itself, both on an ontological and gnoseological level, as archetypal of the sensible world. But the relationship between the two worlds is not direct, that is, the sensible distorts, diminishes the intelligibility of things, as Plato says in the words of Socrates:

οὐκοῦν καὶ τόδε πάλαι ἐλέγομεν, ὅτι ἡ ψυχὴ, ὅταν μὲν τῷ σώματι προσχρῆται εἰς τὸ σκοπεῖν τι ἢ διὰ τοῦ ὄραν ἢ διὰ τοῦ ἀκούειν ἢ δι' ἄλλης τινὸς αἰσθήσεως—τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν τὸ διὰ τοῦ σώματος, τὸ δι' αἰσθήσεως σκοπεῖν τι— τότε μὲν ἔλκεται ὑπὸ τοῦ σώματος εἰς τὰ οὐδέποτε κατὰ ταῦτα ἔχοντα, καὶ αὐτὴ πλανᾶται καὶ ταράττεται καὶ εἰλιγγιᾶ ὡσπερ μεθύουσα, ἅτε τοιούτων ἐφαπτομένη; (*Phd.*, 79c)<sup>10</sup>.

Let's recall the allegory of the cave: for Plato, man lives as if in a cave, chained – a fact that is not lost on him, shackled at the neck and legs,

---

<sup>10</sup> "Now weren't we also saying some time ago that whenever the soul additionally uses the body for considering something, whether through seeing or through hearing or through some other sense – for to consider something through the body is to do so through sense-perception – at those times it is dragged by the body into things that never stay in the same state, and the soul itself wanders and is disturbed and giddy as if drunk, because the things it is grasping have the same kind of instability?" (Plato 2010, 70).

unable to turn their heads<sup>11</sup> –, experiencing only the appearance, in other words, the shadow of what it really is<sup>12</sup>, and this state is nothing more than a state of ignorance<sup>13</sup>.

Plato thus makes it clear that man's nature is not that of appearances and the world of appearances is the world of ignorance. The philosopher would, at first, be between this ignorance and the wisdom of the wise or the gods as Diotima says in response to the question of who should seek wisdom:

δηλον δὴ, ἔφη, τοῦτό γε ἤδη καὶ παιδί, ὅτι οἱ μεταξὺ τούτων ἀμφοτέρων, ὧν ἂν εἶη καὶ ὁ Ἔρως, ἔστιν γὰρ δὴ τῶν καλλίστων ἡ σοφία, Ἔρως δ' ἔστιν ἔρως περὶ τὸ καλόν, ὥστε ἀναγκαῖον ἔρωτα φιλόσοφον εἶναι, φιλόσοφον δὲ ὄντα μεταξὺ εἶναι σοφοῦ καὶ ἀμαθοῦς. αἰτία δὲ αὐτῶ καὶ τούτων ἡ γένεσις: πατρὸς μὲν γὰρ σοφοῦ ἔστι καὶ εὐπόρου, μητρὸς δὲ οὐ σοφῆς καὶ ἀπόρου. ἡ μὲν οὖν φύσις τοῦ δαίμονος, ὃ φίλε Σώκρατες, αὕτη: ὃν δὲ σὺ φήθης ἔρωτα (*Symp.*, 204b)<sup>14</sup>.

#### 4. The body pulls downwards, the soul towards god

As we all know, the gods, and for that matter the sages, are all up there, and philosophy is this consistent ascent from this world of dust to the ideal world of the sun, which illuminates everything and makes the shadows of sensible ignorance disappear. Exposed to the sun, man would no longer catch a scald, because then he would no longer have a body. The body, unlike the soul, was of no concern to Plato, who became known in history by the nickname that emphasized his corporeality.

<sup>11</sup> ἔν ταύτη ἐκ παίδων ὄντας ἐν δεσμοῖς καὶ τὰ σκέλη καὶ τοὺς ἀγκύνας, ὥστε μένειν τε αὐτοὺς εἷς τε τὸ πρόσθεν μόνον ὄρᾶν, κύκλω δὲ τὰς κεφαλὰς ὑπὸ τοῦ δεσμοῦ ἀδυνάτους περιάγειν (*Rp*, 514a-b).

<sup>12</sup> παντάπασι δὴ, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, οἱ τοιοῦτοι οὐκ ἂν ἄλλο τι νομίζοιεν τὸ ἀληθές ἢ τὰς τῶν σκευαστῶν σκιάς (*Rp*, 515c).

<sup>13</sup> σκόπει δὴ, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, αὐτῶν λύσιν τε καὶ ἴσιν τῶν τε δεσμῶν καὶ τῆς ἀφροσύνης, οἷα τις ἂν εἶη, εἰ φύσει τοιάδε συμβαίνοι αὐτοῖς [...] (*Rp*, 515c).

<sup>14</sup> “Even a child would know the answer to that by now”, she replied. “It is those who are in between, and Love is one of them. For wisdom is a most beautiful thing, and Love is love of the beautiful, so Love must be a philosopher, and a philosopher is in a middle state between a wise man and an ignorant one. The reason for this too lies in his parentage: he has a father who is wise and resourceful, and a mother who is neither. “This, then, is the nature of that particular spirit, my dear Socrates” (Plato 2008: 41).

And what does the body do? Plato, surely from his own experience, warns us well in the *Phaedo*:

ἐρώτων δὲ καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν καὶ φόβων καὶ εἰδώλων παντοδαπῶν καὶ φλυαρίας ἐμπίμπλησιν ἡμᾶς πολλῆς, ὥστε τὸ λεγόμενον ὡς ἀληθῶς τῷ ὄντι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ οὐδὲ φρονῆσαι ἡμῖν ἐγγίγνεται οὐδέποτε οὐδέν. καὶ γὰρ πολέμους καὶ στάσεις καὶ μάχας οὐδὲν ἄλλο παρέχει ἢ τὸ σῶμα καὶ αἱ τούτου ἐπιθυμίαι [...] καὶ ἐκ τούτου ἀσχολίαν ἄγομεν φιλοσοφίας πέρι διὰ πάντα ταῦτα (*Phd.*, 66c-d)<sup>15</sup>.

Philosophy is, then, the only science that can free us from all the problematic decisions of the body. The body even takes advantage of the moments when we try hard to philosophize: it presents itself everywhere and agitates us, disturbs us, and leaves us perplexed, in such a way that because of it we cannot contemplate the truth. The body is thus an active and passive barrier to knowledge, that is, to philosophy. The smell of cooking is enough for the body to quickly motivate my steps towards food instead of towards the only thing that can satiate, the truth. Perhaps we don't need to sit by a well in Samaria to realize how certain Platonic and Christian ideas have so many affinities.

It would be necessary to get rid of the body and contemplate things in themselves only with the soul to know and philosophize. Plato realized that he was faced with a mundane impossibility: even the greatest ascetic, the greatest philosopher, has a body and his inclination towards pleasures (or the ephebes) leads the soul to the greatest of philosophical sins: not wanting to know the truth. That's why he warned us:

εἰ γὰρ μὴ οἷόν τε μετὰ τοῦ σώματος μηδὲν καθαρῶς γνῶναι, δυοῖν θάτερον, ἢ οὐδαμοῦ ἔστιν κτήσασθαι τὸ εἰδέναι ἢ τελευτήσασιν: τότε γὰρ αὐτὴ καθ' αὐτὴν ἢ ψυχὴ ἔσται χωρὶς τοῦ σώματος, πρότερον δ' οὐ (*Phd.*, 66e-67a)<sup>16</sup>.

---

<sup>15</sup> “The body fills us up with loves, desires, fears and fantasies of every kind, and a great deal of nonsense, with the result that it really and truly, as the saying goes, makes it impossible for us even to think about anything at any moment. For it is nothing but the body and its desires that causes wars, uprisings and conflicts. [...] It is thanks to the body that, for all these reasons, we have no time for philosophy” (Plato 2010: 52-53).

<sup>16</sup> “For if it is impossible to have pure knowledge of anything when we are in the company of the body, then either knowledge cannot be acquired anywhere, or it can be acquired when we are dead” (Plato 2010: 53).

The Platonic soul and the Christian soul meet once again at this point: knowledge of the body and the world limits future hope. But Plato, concerned, after all, with our salvation from ignorance, soon leaves us with a piece of advice:

καὶ ἐν ᾧ ἂν ζῶμεν, οὕτως, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἐγγυτάτω ἐσόμεθα τοῦ εἰδέναι, ἐὰν ὅτι μάλιστα μηδὲν ὀμιλῶμεν τῷ σώματι μηδὲ κοινωνῶμεν, ὅτι μὴ πᾶσα ἀνάγκη, μηδὲ ἀναπιμπλώμεθα τῆς τούτου φύσεως, ἀλλὰ καθαρεύομεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, ἕως ἂν ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸς ἀπολύσῃ ἡμᾶς: καὶ οὕτω μὲν καθαροὶ ἀπαλλαττόμενοι τῆς τοῦ σώματος ἀφροσύνης, ὡς τὸ εἰκὸς μετὰ τοιούτων τε ἐσόμεθα καὶ γνωσόμεθα δι' ἡμῶν' αὐτῶν πᾶν τὸ εἰλικρινές, τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶν ἴσως τὸ ἀληθές (*Phd.*, 67a-b)<sup>17</sup>.

or in another passage,

βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι, τότε δὲ πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον· ἄρτι γινώσκω ἐκ μέρους, τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθη (1 Cor 13:12)<sup>18</sup>.

## 5. Post-mortem argument

Thus, it is only in death, as the full separation of body and soul, that the philosopher reaches his main goal: the truth of things, and in his life the philosopher does nothing more than prepare for this separation by living as much as possible in this soul-body separation. This is the exercise that Plato recommends, and the faculties of philosophy were, and often still are, gyms for learning to die, or rather, gyms for making the body die in search of the first intellection (μελέτης θανάτου) i.e. a training in death (of being dead).

I can already see a cynical thought sneaking across some people's heads, perhaps coming from the body: we all have the same destiny, that

---

<sup>17</sup> “For then the soul will be alone by itself, apart from the body, whereas before then it will not. And in the time when we are alive, it seems that we will be closest to knowledge if, so far as possible, we have no dealings with the body and do not associate with it except when absolutely necessary, and are not infected with its nature, but instead keep pure from it, until the god himself releases us. If we stay pure in this way by being separated from the body's folly, in all likelihood we will be with people of this kind, and will know through our very selves everything that is unalloyed, which is, equally, the truth” (Plato 2010: 53).

<sup>18</sup> “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (KJV).

is, we all die and nothing distinguishes us. To this end, Plato presents us with a *true post-mortem argument*, or if we want to go further, a truly *eschatological* one: don't think that we can do everything in this life according to the body because after we die we will find the sun that will free us from the hardships that the body has given us. Anyone who does this will surely find an enthusiastic Plato waiting for Charon's boat to take us to Hades and saying: got you! You had to be a true philosopher in life to be able to live with the gods here in Hades (that rational and certainly not mythological place)! So you're going to live in the mud!

Now, in a non-fictional way, Socrates emphasizes:

εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἦν ὁ θάνατος τοῦ παντὸς ἀπαλλαγὴ, ἔρμαιον ἂν ἦν τοῖς κακοῖς ἀποθανοῦσι τοῦ τε σώματος ἅμ' ἀπηλλάχθαι καὶ τῆς αὐτῶν κακίας μετὰ τῆς ψυχῆς νῦν δ' ἐπειδὴ ἀθάνατος φαίνεται οὐσα, οὐδεμία ἂν νῦν δ' ἐπειδὴ ἀθάνατος φαίνεται οὐσα, οὐδεμία ἂν εἴη αὐτῇ ἄλλη ἀποφυγὴ κακῶν οὐδὲ σωτηρία πλὴν τοῦ ὡς βελτίστην τε καὶ φρονιμωτάτην γενέσθαι (*Phd.*, 107c-d)<sup>19</sup>.

There is, therefore, a kind of hell (rational, of course), which we will be entitled to, certainly, I will, for not being true philosophers:

οὗ δὴ τίνουσι δίκην ζῶντες τὸν εικότα βίον ᾧ ὁμοιοῦνται: ἐὰν δ' εἴπωμεν ὅτι, ἂν μὴ ἀπαλλαγῶσι τῆς δεινότητος, καὶ τελευτήσαντας αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖνος μὲν ὁ τῶν κακῶν καθαρὸς τόπος οὐ δέξεται, ἐνθάδε δὲ τὴν αὐτοῖς ὁμοιότητα τῆς διαγωγῆς ἀεὶ ἔξουσι, κακοὶ κακοῖς συνόντες, ταῦτα δὴ καὶ παντάπασι ὡς δεινοὶ καὶ πανοῦργοι ἀνοήτων τινῶν ἀκούσονται (*Tht.*, 177a)<sup>20</sup>.

---

<sup>19</sup> “For if death were separation from everything, it would be a godsend for wicked people to die, and thus be separated both from the body and at the same time, by also losing their soul, from their own vice. As it is, however, since the soul is evidently immortal, it could have no means of safety or of escaping evils, other than becoming both as good and as wise as possible” (Plato 2010:104).

<sup>20</sup> “And for that they pay the penalty of living the life that resembles the model they follow. But if we tell them that unless they rid themselves of their cleverness, that other region, pure of all that is bad, will not receive them even when they are dead, and meanwhile here they will always have an existence that reproduces their own selves, bad people keeping the company of things that are bad – if we tell them that, they will respond exactly like the clever, unscrupulous characters they are, and hear it as coming from imbeciles of some sort” (Plato 2015: 48).

Good philosophers will say that there is an ethical dimension here: there is no future salvation if we are not ethical in the present life. A (painful) process is, therefore, necessary to reach the intelligible world, where you will find things as they are, but more importantly, you will be able to “look” at the “sun”, even if you can’t distinguish it. The sun will then be understood by those who come out of the cave as the cause of all things:

καὶ μετὰ ταῦτ’ ἂν ἤδη συλλογίζοιτο περὶ αὐτοῦ ὅτι οὗτος ὁ τὰς τε ὥρας παρέχων καὶ ἐνιαυτοῦς καὶ πάντα ἐπιτροπεύων τὰ ἐν τῷ ὀρωμένῳ τόπῳ, καὶ ἐκείνων ὧν σφεῖς ἐώρων τρόπον τινὰ πάντων αἴτιος (*Rp*, 516b-c)<sup>21</sup>.

## 6. Education towards the good

It is precisely the Sun that is the idea of the Good (τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα), and it is this idea that is the cause of all that is just and beautiful. Although the nature of the soul is that of the intelligible world, it is not natural for man to act by this nature, which implies an effort, and this effort comes from education:

οὔτι τὸ ποιητικὸν ἀτιμάζων γένος, ἀλλὰ παντὶ δῆλον ὡς τὸ μιμητικὸν ἔθνος, οἷς ἂν ἐντραφεῖ, ταῦτα μιμήσεται ῥᾶστα καὶ ἄριστα, τὸ δ’ ἐκτὸς τῆς τροφῆς ἐκάστοις (*Tim.*, 19d)<sup>22</sup>.

The “men in the cave” are placed there from childhood, and something holds them to the ground. What holds them down is nothing other than the sensible world, the world of the changeable, inclined downwards, that is, not towards the intelligible world, towards the idea of good, but towards pleasures and injustice. So education will serve to cut off this inclination:

συγγενεῖς ὥσπερ μολυβδίδας, αἱ δὴ ἐδωδαῖς τε καὶ τοιούτων ἡδοναῖς τε καὶ λιχναῖαις προσφυεῖς γιγνόμεναι περὶ κάτω στρέφουσι τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ὄψιν: ὧν εἰ ἀπαλλαγὴν περιστρέφετο εἰς τὰ ἀληθῆ, καὶ ἐκεῖνα ἂν τὸ αὐτὸ τοῦτο τῶν αὐτῶν ἀνθρώπων ὀξύτατα ἐώρα, ὥσπερ καὶ ἐφ’ ἃ νῦν τέτραπται (*Rp*, 519b)<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> “But when it is seen, the conclusion must be that it turns out to be the cause of all that is right and good for everything” (Plato 2003: 223).

<sup>22</sup> “None of them finds it easy to reproduce on stage anything that falls outside his experience, and they find it even less easy to put such a thing into words” (Plato 2008: 6).

<sup>23</sup> “These cling to it as a result of eating, gluttony, and pleasures of that sort, and direct the gaze of the soul downward” (Plato 2003: 225).

For Plato, the body is this inclination towards error, and knowledge does not come from it. And quoting:

πότε οὖν, ἢ δ' ὅς, ἡ ψυχὴ τῆς ἀληθείας ἄπτεται; ὅταν μὲν γὰρ μετὰ τοῦ σώματος ἐπιχειρῇ τι σκοπεῖν, δῆλον ὅτι τότε ἐξαπατᾶται ὑπ' αὐτοῦ (*Phd.*, 65b)<sup>24</sup>.

This is the central element of the so-called theory of reminiscence because if we only perceive error from the body<sup>25</sup>, this means that the affirmation of the just, the beautiful, and the good, that is, ideas, cannot come from it (*Phd.*, 65d-66a) (in other words, all essences come from the soul)<sup>26</sup>. It stands to reason that those who distance themselves from the bodily senses will be closer to reality than those who rely on them. The philosopher does nothing more than prepare himself to experience the definitive separation of body and soul (i.e., death, cf. *Phd.*, 67d.), living in it as much as possible (*Phd.*, 67e.).

Given that we cannot know essences through the body, it follows that the soul must be immortal, that is, that it has already known ideas and now only needs to remember them (*Phd.*, 75e.). Learning, then, is reminiscence, since the soul is pre-existent to the body and endowed with understanding (*Phd.*, 76c.).

## 7. Notions of evil<sup>27</sup>

It is precisely in a discussion about the immortality of the soul that Plato makes an explicit reference to evil and its nature. If only in the intelligible world do we find the idea of good, the further away we are from that world, the less real things are, and evil occurs precisely at that distance. So, when we want to analyze the soul, we can't analyze that which is closest to the sensible in the soul, namely the body:

---

<sup>24</sup> “‘So,’ he said, ‘when does the soul grasp the truth? Because whenever it attempts to examine something together with the body, clearly at those times it is thoroughly deceived by the body.’” (Plato 2010: 51).

<sup>25</sup> In fact, Plato says that we can obtain knowledge through sensible means. As Gallop tells us, this contradicts what was said earlier. But this fact does not, in our view, allow for anything more than an aporia to be resolved always and only in death. (See notes of David Gallop in Plato 2002: 120-121).

<sup>26</sup> In this sense, it is clear that for us evil is materiality, and does not derive from the soul (Cf. Ilievski 2013)

<sup>27</sup> See Pears 2015 for a reading of the various definitions of evil in order to rethink freedom and the capacity to act in Plato.

ὅτι μὲν τοίνυν ἀθάνατον ψυχή, καὶ ὁ ἄρτι λόγος καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι ἀναγκάσειαν ἄν. οἷον δ' ἐστὶν τῆ ἀληθείᾳ, οὐ λελωβημένον δεῖ αὐτὸ θεάσασθαι ὑπὸ τε τῆς τοῦ σώματος κοινωνίας καὶ ἄλλων κακῶν, ὥσπερ νῦν ἡμεῖς θεώμεθα, ἀλλ' οἷον ἐστὶν καθαρὸν γιγνόμενον, τοιοῦτον ἰκανῶς λογισμῶ διαθεατέον, καὶ πολὺ γε κάλλιον αὐτὸ εὐρήσει καὶ ἐναργέστερον δικαιοσύνας τε καὶ ἀδικίας διόψεται καὶ πάντα ἃ νῦν διήλθομεν (*Rp*, 611b-c)<sup>28</sup>.

The argument that leads us to this conclusion gives us yet another notion of evil, more basic, but also closer to reality. Socrates asks and then answers saying, first, that there is one thing which is good, and another which is evil, and that the latter corrupts and destroys, and the former preserves and saves (*Rp* 608d-e).

But for something to be corrupted, Plato goes on to say that there is evil and vice inherent to the nature of each thing (*Rp*, 609a.). Therefore, for each thing, there is its evil, and if for the body there is an illness, for the soul there is injustice, intemperance, cowardice, and ignorance, and these evils have consequences (*Tht.*, 177a).

But it is also by its nature that the soul, unlike the body, when affected by its evils, does not cause its dissolution (one would have to think that the soul could die and the body remain). In the *Timaeus*, however, perhaps not paradoxically, Plato reconsiders and admits that the body's illnesses affect the soul.

## 9. Divine soul

It is true that for the soul to be immortal, Plato must ensure an immaculate creation of the soul, and this creation is divine. As Chilcott tells us,

Again and again Plato repeats that God is perfectly good and cannot be the author of evil: evil is alien to his nature. And indeed, since God is the αὐτὸ ὁ ἀγαθόν, that he should be in any way responsible for evil would be the gravest contraction in terms<sup>29</sup>.

---

<sup>28</sup> "Very well. That the soul is something immortal is a conclusion we might be driven to both by this recent argument and by other arguments. But if we want to know what it's really like, we shouldn't look at it in the form we currently see it in, crippled by its partnership with the body and other evils, but in its pure state. And that's something which can only be seen adequately by means of reason" (Plato 2003: 333-334).

<sup>29</sup> Chilcott 1923: 27.

Plato thus proceeds to a justification of his demiurge, that is, a true theodicy if theodicies are rational in a dialogue between Socrates and Adeimantus, with the following logic: nothing that is good is harmful, what is not harmful does not produce any evil, and what does not produce any evil cannot be the cause of evil either. The other way round, it is said that good is beneficial and that it is responsible for well-being, that is, it is not responsible for everything but only for what is good. So, if God is good, he can't be responsible for everything - as was commonly believed. If we can't blame God, then we'll have to look elsewhere for the cause of evil (*Rp*, 379b-c).

Thus, once again, it seems logical to Plato that man must be on the "right" side of reality. If evils are not on the side of the divine, and cannot be destroyed:

διὸ καὶ πειρᾶσθαι χρὴ ἐνθένδε ἐκεῖσε φεύγειν ὅτι τάχιστα. φυγὴ δὲ ὁμοίωσις θεῶν κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν: ὁμοίωσις δὲ δίκαιον καὶ ὄσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι (*Tht.*, 176a-b)<sup>30</sup>.

In the *Timaeus*, he adds:

ἀγαθὸς ἦν, ἀγαθῷ δὲ οὐδεὶς περὶ οὐδενὸς οὐδέποτε ἐγγίγνεται φθόνος (*Tim.*, 29e)<sup>31</sup>.

## 10. Ignorance and dispositions

Now, man only practices injustice, only acts unjustly<sup>32</sup>, out of ignorance<sup>33</sup>, and here we add another perspective on evil – which Aristotle will describe as Socrates': no one acts against his notion of what is best, but when he does, he does so out of ignorance (cf. Aristotles, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145b). In short, nobody is wilfully evil.

In *Timaeus*, Plato emphasizes the same answer in a long argument about diseases of the soul and body (*Tim.*, 86b-87b): on the side of the soul

<sup>30</sup> "That is why one must try to escape from here to there as quickly as possible. Escape is becoming as like god as one can, and becoming like god is acquiring justice and piety along with wisdom" (Plato 2015: 47).

<sup>31</sup> "He was good, and nothing good is ever characterized by mean-spiritedness over anything" (Plato 2008: 18). However, Plato hints at a kind of limitation: as far as his power was concerned (see *Tim.* 30a, 32b, 37d, 38c, 42e, 53b, 65c, 71d and 89d). This limitation refers to his layered cosmology, which is also basically a theodicy: a first creation where everything is perfect, and a second-order creation, no longer the responsibility of the demiurge.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Leg.* 731c.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Hackforth 1946.

we have dementia, that is, madness and ignorance. What is at stake here, in essence, is excess. The human being, left in his freedom, only has multiple anxieties and multiple pleasures in his appetites and in the fruits that are born of this condition. He becomes insane for most of his life because of the extreme pleasures and pains, because his soul is sick and is kept insane by the body that is considered not to be sick, but to be purposely evil. But this is not the fact. The problem, Plato would say, is humidity. Moisture is the result of the porosity of the bones or an evil disposition, a sign, as we well know, of rationality *par excellence*, a disposition of the body or education.

Plato thus tries to explain that you can't consider anyone evil without realizing that to be evil there has to be one of two possible dispositions: a wrong disposition of the body or a wrong disposition of the soul (misguided education), that is, a disease of the body or a disease of the soul, and these are completely unrelated to your will because they are - above all - the result of a bad education. The only solution to such a state of affairs is, as we mentioned earlier, to flee evil by reaching for the good.

And this attitude will be compensated, logocratically of course, by the gods, for

καὶ θεοῖς ἄρα ἐχθρὸς ἔσται ὁ ἄδικος, ὃ Θρασύμαχε, ὁ δὲ δίκαιος φίλος (*Rp.* 352b)<sup>34</sup>.

The true philosopher will sit at the right side of the gods, and all will be well in the end.

## 11. The true philosopher obeys god's laws

It is life itself that demands of the philosopher that he continually philosophize, exhorting (*προτρεπτικός*). This Socratic exhortation, and what comes of it, also has to do with his, how can we not say it, specific spirituality. What Socrates does, exhorting and enquiring is nothing more than an order from θεός (Cf. *Ap.*). The “accusation” leveled at Socrates of atheism is therefore ironic. In *Critias* Plato sets us on the right path:

ἐπιθεῖναι βουληθεῖς, ἵνα γένοιτο ἐμμελέστεροι σωφρονισθέντες, συνήγειρεν θεοὺς πάντας εἰς τὴν τιμιωτάτην αὐτῶν οἴκησιν, ἥ δὴ κατὰ μέσον παντὸς τοῦ

---

<sup>34</sup> “In that case, Thrasymachus, the unjust man will be an enemy of the gods as well, while the just man will be a friend” (Plato, *The Republic* 2003: 33).

κόσμου βεβηκυῖα καθορᾷ πάντα ὅσα γενέσεως μετείληφεν, καὶ συναγείρας εἶπεν— ... (*Critias* 121c)<sup>35</sup>.

## Bibliography

### Sources

- Plato (2010). *Meno and Phaedo*. (Translation: Alex Long). Cambridge: CUP.  
 Plato (2002), *Phaedo*. (Translation: David Gallop). Oxford: OUP.  
 Plato (1988), *The Laws*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.  
 Plato (2003), *The Republic*. (Translation: Tom Griffith). Cambridge: CUP.  
 Plato (2008), *The Symposium*. (Translation: M. C. Howatson). Cambridge: CUP.  
 Plato (2015), *Theaetetus and Sophist*. (Translation: Christopher Rowe). Cambridge: CUP.  
 Plato (2008), *Timaeus and Critias*. (Translation: Robin Waterfield). Oxford: OUP.

### Studies

- Bidez, Joseph & Cumont, Franz (2007), *Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la tradition grecque*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.  
 Buxton, Richard (ed.) (2001), *From myth to reason? Studies in the development of Greek thought*. Oxford: OUP.  
 Cherniss, Harold (1954), "The Sources of Evil According to Plato". *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (Feb. 15), 23-30.  
 Chilcott, C. M. (1923), "The Platonic theory of Evil". *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 17 (1), 27-31.  
 Erlich, David (2024), *A bebedeira de Kant*. Lisboa: Planeta.  
 Ilievski, Viktor (2013), "Soul, Causation and Evil: is Plato's ψυχή indeed κινήσεως ἀπάσης αἰτία and τῶν πάντων αἰτία?". *Hermathena*, No. 195 (Winter), 31-54.  
 Hackforth, R. (1946), "Moral Evil and Ignorance in Plato's Ethics". *The Classical Quarterly*, Jul. - Oct., Vol. 40, No. 3/4, 118-120.  
 Meldrum, M. (1950), "Plato and the ἈΡΧΗ ΚΑΚΩΝ". *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 70, 65-74.  
 Pears, Colin David (2015), "Congruency and evil in Plato's *Timaeus*". *The Review of Metaphysics*, September 2015, Vol. 69, No. 1, 93-113.

---

<sup>35</sup> "He summoned all the gods to a meeting in the most awesome of his dwellings, which is located in the centre of the entire universe and so sees all of creation. And when the gods had assembled, he said:" (Plato 2008, 121).

