Divine Moral Psychology in Plato:
the Demiurge, Anaxagoras’ Nous, and *Laws 10*

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Introduction

A common view of ancient Greek ethics is that it was egoistic. That is, all or almost all ancient Greek moral philosophers held that the actions of a fully rational agent have as their ultimate aim that agent’s own welfare or *eudaimonia*.

This view of ancient Greek ethics goes back at least to Zeller and Sidgwick in the 19th century, and is widespread today. Most scholars today, I think, believe that Socratic ethics was egoistic. When Vlastos defended the thesis that Socratic ethics was egoistic he called it “the Eudaimonist Axiom”, so what I will call “egoism” in this paper is often referred to in the Anglophone literature as “eudaimonism”. Many scholars hold that Plato’s ethics rests

*It is a pleasure to dedicate this essay to John Cooper, for his patient mentoring; for his fine scholarship, which has served me and others as model of how as an interpreter to be both philosophically bold and also sensitive to the texts; and for his remarkable service to his university and the profession.*

1 Zeller, II, I, p.443 (Socrates). Sidgwick, *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, pp. 1, 7, 197-8; *Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed., p. 97. This paper is part of a larger project to show that the evidence for eudaemonist egoism in classical Greek ethics is much weaker than scholarly orthodoxy holds. (Maybe it is even false.)

2 “Eudaimonism” is given somewhat different meanings by different scholars. Some of these are not egoistic. (I’ve done that myself, see Morrison 2001.) But Vlastos’ usage has been very influential. (*Socrates*, 1991, p. 103)
on an egoistic foundation, but this is disputed by others. Anyway it is not rare for scholars today to hold some version of the strong thesis endorsed by Sidgwick.³

Since my topic today is Plato, I quote just one example, from Chris Bobonich:

Plato, throughout his career, including the Laws, held the principle . . . of rational eudaimonism: For each individual, the ultimate end of all her rational actions is her own (greatest) happiness.⁴

Two basic points. First, it is important to keep in mind that “rational eudaimonism” is a thesis about the structure of the agent’s motives—one’s own happiness is ultimate—and not a substantive thesis about the agent’s good. This egoism about motives is compatible with many different substantive views about the human good, including views that make an individual’s happiness depend essentially on the happiness of others, or an individual’s happiness partly consist in the happiness of others. So egoism about motives is not inherently “selfish”, and it is compatible with an intrinsic concern for the welfare of others, e.g. if the welfare of others is a component of one’s own good.

The second basic point is the distinction between psychological and rational egoism. Psychological egoism is the view that the actions of all agents have as their ultimate aim that agent’s own welfare or eudaimonia. Rational egoism is the view that the actions of a fully rational agent have as their ultimate aim that agent’s own welfare or eudaimonia.⁵

Divine moral psychology

Scholars of ancient philosophy have given lots and lots of sophisticated attention to the moral psychology of human agents in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Scholars have paid much less attention (not none, but still less) to divine moral psychology. Are motives of

³ Gomez-Lobo, Socratic Ethics, p. 7 (on “the whole tradition of Greek ethics”), Cooper, “Eudaimonia in Stoicism”, p. 427.
⁵ Another important type is ethical egoism, the view that the actions of every agent ought to have as their ultimate aim that agent’s own welfare or eudaimonia. When the “ought” in question is the “ought” of rationality, ethical egoism and rational egoism coincide. On various types of egoism and altruism, see most recently Kraut’s SEP article "Altruism".
divine agents ultimately egoistic, or not, or sometimes yes and sometimes no? If rational egoism is a claim about agents as such, then it should apply to gods as well as mortals. In any case, given the obvious importance of the divine for Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the moral psychology of the gods provides an important and neglected—not just point of comparison but—source of orientation for understanding the moral psychology of mortals.

The Timaeus

Scholars often implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, interpret Socrates or Plato as holding psychological or rational egoism as a general theory of agency. This interpretation faces a decisive counterexample. The Timaeus contains a clear example of purely altruistic action, namely the Demiurge's activity in creating the world. (This example is matched by its parallel in the Phaedo, namely Socrates' description of the activity of Anaxagoras' Nous in shaping the world.) In the next section I will look at the creative activity of the demiurge in the Timaeus, asking what the passage has to say about the theory of rational action. 6

The Demiurge

Before beginning, I should say a word about the notoriously difficult topic of how literally Plato meant us to take his description of the Demiurge. There are many interpretations which treat the Demiurge a mere metaphor, or a principle too abstract to be a genuine agent. I cannot discuss this issue here. I will simply assume that Plato means the Demiurge seriously, so that the cosmos could have been made by a perfectly good creative agent as Plato describes. Or more precisely, I suppose that the myth is realistic in the sense that Plato is describing a possible agent. 7

6 Others who have examined the Timaeus from this point of view include: Silverman, 2010; Bobonich 2002, 450-460; Vasiliiou, 2015, 66 n. 47. Carone 2005 discusses the topic extensively, but since she argues that the demiurge is identical with the world soul, her analysis combines two cases which I in this paper keep distinct.

7 In a way, the status of Timaeus’ story as a mythos gives us more reason to take the account of the Demiurge seriously, rather than less. For it is a very abstract a priori account,
The crucial text comes at 29d7-30a7:

Now why did he who framed this whole universe of becoming frame it? Let us state the reason why: He was good, and one who is good can never become jealous of anything. And so, being free of jealousy, he wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible. In fact, men of wisdom will tell you (and you couldn't do better than to accept their claim) that this, more than anything else, was the most preeminent reason for the origin of the world's coming to be. The god wanted everything to be good and nothing to be bad so far as that was possible . . .

Looked at carefully, this passage contains three slightly different statements of the Demiurge’s motive. The first explanation why the Demiurge created order in the world is negative. “He was good, and one who is good can never become jealous of anything.”

Here Timaeus explains the Demiurge’s creative activity by the absence of a motive, jealousy (phthonos). Now phthonos is a species of jealousy or ill will, which leads a person to deprive another person of goods, often for fear of being equaled or surpassed by that other person. If God declined to create the cosmos due to phthonos, he would do so because he didn’t want to see the world, or any part of it, rival (or perhaps resemble?) his goodness. This “comparative” aspect of phthonos is highlighted when Timaeus says “. . . being free of jealousy, he wanted everything to become as much like himself as possible.”

But absence of a motive cannot by itself motivate action. Timaeus’ Demiurge is free of jealousy. So is Aristotle’s Prime Mover. Yet Aristotle’s Prime Mover is not motivated to make the rest of existence as good as possible. He is content to eternally contemplate his navel. Something more is needed to explain why the Demiurge chooses to create the cosmos, rather than, for example, devoting all of his conscious activity to contemplating eternal Forms.

Timaeus provides the needed extra motive (almost as if it is an explication of

 Based on just a few concepts, divinity and goodness and action. This “thought experiment” gives us a clearer, purer, look at the implications of these concepts than a non-mythological account might give.

8 On phthonos, see L. Brisson 2000.
absence of envy, which it isn’t): “The god wanted everything to be good and nothing to be bad.” (30a1-2) Timaeus asserts that the Demiurge’s motive is⁹

**Universal Beneficence**: Do what will make all things be as good as possible.

Timaeus explains: “Now it wasn’t permitted (nor is it now) that one who is supremely good should do anything but what is best.” (30a6-7)¹⁰

The thesis that the Demiurge is universally beneficent is not news. It is famous! Furthermore, the idea that the gods act in order to make things as good as possible is common in Plato.¹¹

What is less often noticed is the implications of this fact for egoism/eudaimonism.

**Implications for egoism.**

The Demiurge is fully wise and fully good. In creating the cosmos, the Demiurge makes something that is good—very good!—at no advantage to himself. The Demiurge’s act of creation is an act of **pure altruism**.

The example of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* is thus incompatible with both psychological and rational egoism:

**Psychological egoism**: Each agent aims at his own happiness as the ultimate end of all his acts.

The Demiurge is already perfectly good. So the Demiurge’s activity of creating the cosmos cannot benefit the Demiurge. If psychological egoism were true of all agents as such, then the Demiurge would not create the cosmos, for he would have no motive to do

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⁹ The *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus* are consistent on this. Anaxagoras’ Nous in the *Phaedo* and the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* have the same fundamental motive. See below.

¹⁰ On the goodness of the demiurge, see also 28c, 30d, 37c6- 37e2, 53b. On the desire of the demiurge to make the world as good as possible, cf. 46c-d.) The Greek behind “permitted” is themis. Here I leave aside the complications potentially introduced by this difficult term.

¹¹ Perhaps most famously at Rep. 379c. See also Cra. 400a-401a, Euthyphro 14e-15b; Law 899ff. (discussed below), 941b; Phaedrus 247a-e; Philebus27b-30d; Rep. 380ab, 391e; Soph. 265ce, Statesman 269b-264e. Furthermore, the Demiurge is often identified with Nous. Since “Nous acts for the sake of the good” is close to analytic in Plato (Menn, 1995, p. 2), this provides another well-known argument for the Demiurge’s the Universal Benevolence. On the goodness of Nous, see recently van Riele 2013, pp. 105-110.
The second view is:

**Rational egoism:** It is rational for each agent to aim at his own happiness as the ultimate end of all his acts.

This second view allows that not all agents aim at their own happiness as the ultimate end of all their acts. Irrational agents, agents whose rationality is in some way compromised, may not aim at their own happiness as the ultimate end of all their acts. The Demiurge, however, is wise: he is perfectly and fully rational. Yet his creation of the cosmos is pure altruism. So the Demiurge is a decisive counterexample to Rational Egoism.

**Objections to Demiurgic altruism.**

**Objection 1:** The demiurge exercises his creative abilities when he forms the cosmos. Exercising his creative abilities is good and desirable for the demiurge, so his activity need not be purely altruistic after all.\(^\text{12}\) Reply: this is an Aristotelian reading of the demiurge’s activity (actualizing a rational potential is a good). But it is implausible to ascribe this Aristotelian reasoning to Plato.

**Objection 2:** A related point has been made by Terence Irwin. He says of the demiurge:

Plato seems to assume that the god will want to express his goodness, even when his self-preservation does not require it. The god wants to express his goodness by exercising his capacity to create the sort of goodness that he has . . .\(^\text{13}\)

This interpretation of the demiurge’s creative activity misdescribes the demiurge’s motive. “The demiurge wants to express himself” makes the demiurge’s motive a simple self-regarding one: he wants, *about himself*, that this self be expressed. But Plato’s text says something quite different: “The god wanted everything to be as good as possible.”

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\(^\text{12}\) This objection has been raised several times in conversation. Something similar is suggested by Bobonich 2002, p 433: the idea that promoting the good of others is good for the agent because it is the “realization of his nature”.

\(^\text{13}\) Irwin 1995, p. 309. This objection is different from the previous one. Although Irwin mentions the demiurge “exercising his capacity to create”, the Aristotelian point is not what he has in mind.
demiurge’s basic desire is that *everything* (i.e. in the cosmos) be as good as possible.

Of course, the passage does mention a self-regarding motive, though not one about self-expression. The text says that the demiurge wanted everything to be “as much like himself as possible”. This might suggest a narcissistic motive: the god finds it desirable, somehow, that everything in the cosmos *resemble himself*. But Plato is indulging in a bit of humor here. The narcissistic motive is not objectionable, because it is a derived motive. What the god wants is that everything in the cosmos be as good as possible. Since the god himself is better than anything in the cosmos can be, it follows from this that the god has the *derived* motive of wanting everything in the cosmos to be as much like himself as possible.

**Objection 3:** When the demiurge has constructed the World Animal, we are told that it was “a joyful thing” (*agalma*)\(^{14}\) to the eternal gods, and he rejoiced. So the demiurge obtains some benefit after all: namely the pleasure of rejoicing. Reply: this is a bit of playful language, not to be taken very seriously.\(^{15}\) It is introduced to explain why the Demiurge continued with the next phase of his project. But this fact needs no explanation: the Demiurge continues his project because it is incomplete and he wants to make it as good as possible.

**Craftsmanship and goodness**

In their books, both Johansen and Sedley\(^{16}\) have made *craftsmanship* the key concept for understanding the Demiurge’s activity. They both derive the Demiurge’s desire to create a world that is as good as possible from the fact that the Demiurge is an ideal craftsman. It is a fundamental feature of good craftsmanship\(^{17}\) that it aims “for what is best, namely for the proper ordering of his craft’s material or objects.” (Sedley 108). Since the

\(^{14}\) *Tim. 37c7* is a difficult text to interpret. It is a mystery who the “everlasting gods” are. See Taylor *ad loc*. The meaning of *agalma* here is uncertain. Brisson 2001 translates it “representation” (see p. 236, n. 184). A more common interpretation is that the *agalma* is something the gods delight in.

\(^{15}\) Even taking the language literally *and* supposing that the demiurge feels delight at it, we need not suppose that the delight is the *motive* or *goal*, and it would be odd to suppose so given that what makes it wonderful or delightful is its goodness, which is what we have already been told he is aiming at. (I owe this point to David Riesbeck.)

\(^{16}\) Johansen 2004, Sedley 2007. Johansen (pp. 83-86) goes so far as to suggest that the demiurge as identical to the Form Craftsmanship.

\(^{17}\) Familiar from *Gorgias* 500e-504a and elsewhere.
world’s creator is a craftsman, a demiourgos, he aims to make his creation as good as possible.

I shall argue that this gets the explanation backwards. The essential feature of the Demiurge is that he is good. Because he is good, he aims to make the cosmos as good as possible. Because he is good he is also wise: he knows the difference between better and worse and how to bring about the good. Because the Demiurge is good and wise, he deserves to be called a “craftsman”.

It is true that in Timaeus’ exposition, the god’s character as craftsman is mentioned first (28a). But the purpose of this section (27c-28d) is to establish, from the assumption that the cosmos is good, that the cosmos must have had a good creator who looked upon an eternal model for his creation.

At 28d Timaeus says: “let us state the reason (dia tina aitian) he who constructed the cosmos did so”. This phrase announces that Timaeus is about to give the Creator’s reason, i.e. his motive, for acting as he does. And the answer is: “He was good”. 18

Sedley and Johansen write as if the demiurge reasons: “I am a good craftsman. Good craftsmen make the objects of their craft as good as possible. So I will make the world as good as possible.” But this is not the reasoning that Timaeus describes.19 In the text that gives the reason for the god’s construction of the cosmos (29e30b) the word demiourgos does not appear.

Timaeus is telling us that:

(A) Anyone who is perfectly good will only do what’s best.
(B) The Demiurge is perfectly good.
(C) The Demiurge will only do what’s best.

**Why the Demiurge chooses to act**

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18 cf 28c, where demiurge is first called good.
19 In his 2014 article Johansen continues to make craftsmanship the key: “The motivation for the craftsman may now be understood.” p. 305. But he now gives the goodness of the craftsman an independent role: it is because the craftsman is good that he chooses to create, rather than leave the chaos as it is. Cf. Silverman 2010, pp. 86-87 on the demiurge’s choice to act.
It is fascinating to ask two separate questions about the Demiurge’s activity: 1. Why did the Demiurge choose to make the cosmos as good as possible (and not some other way), and 2. Why did the demiurge choose to act at all? What is wrong with the idea of a perfectly good but idle Demiurge?

Of course this second question is the precursor to the famous medieval question, Why did God (being good) freely choose to create the world?

Johansen has recently suggested (2014) that the reason the Demiurge makes the world as good as possible is that the Demiurge is a craftsman, whereas the reason the Demiurge chooses to act at all is that he is good. The interpretation I am offering gives the same answer to both questions. namely Demiurge’s goodness.20

The justification for egoism

The Anglophone literature on Socrates and Plato is full of discussions of egoism (or “eudaimonism”). Scholars are often vague or inexplicit about two crucial dimensions of the view:

(1) Extent—to what group of agents does it apply?
(2) Justification—What, if any, is the philosophical justification for the principle?

That scholars are often inexplicit about these two dimensions is understandable, because the issue usually comes up in the context of interpreting a particular passage. In that context it is enough to assume the principle applies at least to the agents under discussion (usually human beings). And the interpretive question is usually whether an egoistic premise is present, implicitly or explicitly, in the argument. The deeper justification of that premise is not immediately relevant.

However, understanding the significance of the Demiurge requires being explicit about both questions (1) and (2). The Demiurge is a counterexample to egoism only if that principle applies to all rational agents.

Now Plato—very unkindly—does not give an explicit justification for egoism.21 But scholars who do give a justification for egoism in Socrates or Plato often ground it in

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20 On this see also Vasiliou 2015, p. 66 n.47.
rational agency. The nature of rational agency is such that all rational agents (either always, or when fully rational) seek their own eudaimonia as their ultimate aim.

This means that one possible response to the Demiurge counterexample is to say that gods and mortals differ here. Gods are universally beneficent, but human beings are (rational or psychological) egoists. For scholars inclined in this direction, the Demiurge counter-example is a provocation and a challenge: exactly what is the philosophical justification for this difference. Exactly what is it about human beings that makes them all, as a species, egoists, whereas the gods are beneficent? Is it a brute fact, like having opposable thumbs or the ability to add numbers? Or is there a feature of human agency, or of the human condition, that makes egoism (either psychological or rational) universally true of human beings yet false of the Demiurge (and, I am suggesting, false of the gods in general)?

This is a very rich topic. But I’m not aware of a fully worked out account of this kind. The Demiurge counterexample may reveal a serious gap in the eudaemonist interpretation of Plato.

**Anaxagoras’ Nous in the Phaedo**

The altruism of the demiurge’s activity in the *Timaeus* is matched by the parallel example of Anaxoras’ *Nous* in the *Phaedo*.

The philosophical focus of the Anaxagoras episode is the nature of scientific explanation. I will be approaching this text from an unusual angle, asking what the passage has to say about the *theory of rational action*.

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with this cause and it seemed to me good, in a way, that Nous should be the cause of all. I thought that if this were so, the directing Nous would direct everything and arrange each thing in the way that was best. If then one wished to know the cause of each thing, why it comes to be or perishes or exists, one had to find what was the best way for it to be, or to be acted upon, or to act. On these premises then it befitted a man to investigate only, about this and other things, what is best. The same man must inevitably also know what is worse, for that is part of the same knowledge. (97c1-d6)

Socrates portrays Anaxagoras’ Nous as powerful and wise and good. Nous has the power to direct and arrange everything in the cosmos. Nous uses this power to arrange everything in the way that is best. How things are determines how they react and behave, so Nous directs the cosmos so that everything exists and is acted upon and acts, always for the best. To have this power, Nous must know which arrangements and activities would be better or worse for all possible circumstances. That is, Nous must have a thoroughly comprehensive knowledge of the good (and its correlate bad). Nous is the cause that makes everything in the cosmos good, and it never is the cause of any bad. What always and everywhere is the cause of goodness is itself good, hence Nous is good.

Nous does not create, it arranges. Nous takes pre-existing material and orders it into wholes that as good as possible.

Later on Socrates gives more information about the sort of explanation he would expect from Nous:

I never thought that Anaxagoras, who said that those things were directed by Mind, would bring in any other cause for them than that it was best for them to be as they are. Once he had given the best for each as the cause for each and common good of all, I thought he would go on to explain what is the best for each individual and for the common good for all, . . . (98a7-b3)

23 “Power” and “wisdom” are implicit: Nous can order the cosmos as it chooses (power) and it has the full knowledge of good and bad (wisdom) needed in order to dispose of the cosmos for the best.
The goal of Nous is to make the world good as possible at every level. Nous makes each item good; it organizes larger wholes so that they contribute to the common good of their parts and are themselves good. \(^{24}\) This process of ordering-for-the-sake-of-the-good, carried out from the smallest parts to the largest whole of all, makes the cosmos as a whole good.

This is Socrates’ story of the role that Anaxagoras’ Nous ought to play in the cosmos. Let us now ask a crucial question: Why does Anaxagoras’ Nous behave this way? Why does Nous choose to order and arrange everything in this optimizing way?

Anaxagoras’ Nous is no egoist. Nous is inherently wise and good. Thus Nous’s state is already as good as it can be. There is no hint in the text that activity of crafting the cosmos makes Nous any better than it otherwise would be. So Nous has no self-interested reasons for its action. The activity of Nous in shaping the cosmos is thus a case of pure altruism.

This is a strong claim. Two objections must immediately be addressed. The first is that Nous here is a cosmic causal principle, but not an agent. Nous does not act intentionally, and therefore Nous does not have motives. And if Nous does not have motives at all, it is wrong to call the causal activity of Nous altruistic.

Now, Socrates does not explicitly say, “Nous thought ABC and therefore decided XYZ.” To evaluate this objection, we must look at the language Socrates uses and ask what that language implicitly implies. Let’s begin with the term “Nous”. Now the history of the word is complicated\(^ {25} \), but it is fair to translate Nous as Mind or Reason. Everywhere in Plato Nous is

\(^{24}\) Here I interpret the “common good” in Socrates’ remarks to apply not just at the cosmic level, but at intermediate levels as well.

\(^{25}\) The literature on the meaning of nous is large. See now a special issue of Methodos: (16) 2016, La notion d’intelligence (nous-noeïn) dans la Grèce antique. Also e.g. Lesher, “The Emergence of Philosophical Interest in Cognition”, OSAP (12) 1994, and of course Menn 1995.
cognitive. Unless the text gives us special reason to think otherwise, we must suppose that Socrates imagines Nous, not as a mere primitive force, but as a mind that acts for reasons. Now let’s look at what Nous is said to do. Socrates says that Nous “orders” things (kosmein, diakosmein 97c1, 5) and places things in whatever way is best (97c). When Nous is said to “place things in whatever way is best” (τιθέναι ταύτῃ ὧπῃ ἄν βέλτιστα ἔχῃ) this implies intelligent, and thus intentional, action.

The second objection is that the text does not explicitly say that Nous does not benefit from its ordering activity, or that it, alone by itself, is as good as it can be. This is a more serious charge than the previous one. The first response to make is that Socrates does not say that Nous benefits itself in its activity. He gives a concise summary of the benefits of Nous’s activity: the things ordered by Nous are made as good as possible, each thing individually and in common. If Socrates had thought that Nous itself benefited, he should have added that explicitly. The second response depends on inferences using standard Socratic and Platonic normative principles. Whoever knows everything about what makes things good and bad is fully wise, and whatever is fully wise is perfectly good. We are entitled to assume that the character Socrates in the *Phaedo* upholds these principles and would apply them in this case.²⁶

And remember: what interests us is Socrates’ version of Anaxagoras’ Nous, and not the views of the historical Anaxagoras. The historical Anaxagoras’ views, so far as we know them from fragmentary testimony, introduce some complications, which I leave aside here.

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²⁶ In his discussion of why Anaxagoras’ Nous is motivated to act, Sedley speculates: “it is a least a possibility that he thinks of worlds as created by nous out of motives of pure self-interest.” (*Creationism*, p. 24) Nous’s self-interested motive consists, on this suggestion, in having human beings to distribute parts of itself into.
For Socrates in the *Phaedo*, Nous is a god. It is an imaginary god. Socrates is not sure that Nous exists and orders the cosmos. Socrates simply *wishes* that there were a Nous ordering the cosmos in that way, because then the cosmos would be the best possible and would have a rational structure that permits the most satisfying physical explanations.

We have seen that the activity of the Demiurge in Plato’s *Timaeus* is a decisive counter-example to the interpretation that Plato’s ethics is egoistic, based on rational agency: Plato thought that it is a principle of agency that every rational agent acts with the ultimate aim of promoting his or her own welfare or goodness. Anaxagoras’ *Nous* is a counterexample in the same way. Although Socrates is not sure that Nous is actual, he certainly believes that Nous is possible: it *could be the case* that the cosmos is ordered by an all-wise cosmic Nous of this kind. This *possible* Nous is an agent that is both perfectly wise and purely altruistic in its actions. Therefore Socrates in this passage implicitly denies the principle of rational agency that many scholars appeal to in explaining Plato’s supposed egoistic psychology.

Socrates’ implicit theory of rational agency denies egoism. That is a negative claim. There is also a strong positive claim. Let’s go back to the first passage:

I thought that if this [that Nous is the cause of all] were so, the directing Nous would direct everything and arrange each thing in the way that was best.(97c4-6)

Socrates thinks that Nous—Mind or Reason—would arrange everything for the best. Socrates believes that Nous acts according to the principle of Universal Beneficence:

**Universal Beneficence-Nous:** Do what will make things as good as possible.
Cosmic Nous is pure Reason. Whatever Nous does is what the purely rational agent would do. Therefore Socrates is assuming that Universal Beneficence is a principle of rational agency.

**Laws 10**

The accounts of divine beneficence in *Laws* 10 and in the *Timaeus* are compatible. In both, the gods are completely good and are motivated by their goodness to make the cosmos as good as possible. The object of the Athenian Stranger’s arguments in the *Laws* is to establish, not creation of order as with the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*, but maintenance: that the gods continue to care for the welfare of the cosmos, paying attention to the smallest details.

The gods who maintain the cosmos in good order are souls. These souls are perfectly good and completely virtuous: they are the best. (*Laws* 897c7-8, 898c7, 899b, 900d2-3, 901e1, 902e8). Being good, they take care to maintain the cosmos in the best condition as possible. Since what interests us is the moral psychology of divine agents, we want to know: What exactly is the connection between the gods’ goodness and their beneficial activity? The Athenian Stranger is not very explicit about this. The principle “whatever is completely good causes good and never causes bad” is implicitly at work throughout the passage. At 904b2-3 he states this version of the principle: “whatever in soul is good is naturally beneficial, and whatever is bad is harmful”.

As we saw in Socrates’ discussion of Anaxagoras in the *Phaedo*, Nous=reason always chooses the good. So also here: “. . . Every time soul joins with reason (nous) [god correctly for the gods] it guides all things toward what is correct and happy (ortha kai

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27 This is a familiar thought in Plato.
28 The text is corrupt here.
eudaimona), but when it associates with lack-of-reason it produces in all things the opposite of these.” (897b1-4)

The Athenian begins his argument that the gods care for human affairs with this principle: “[the gods] being good with respect to every virtue, the supervision [epimeleia] of all things is perfectly appropriate (oikeiotatē) to them” (900d2-3).

The Athenian does not give a positive argument in favor of this principle. The implicit positive argument is:

1. the gods are fully virtuous, i.e. good;
2. the gods have the ability to govern the smallest details of the cosmos
3. whatever is good will produce whatever good it can.
4. therefore the gods will govern the smallest details of the cosmos to make them as good as possible.

Instead of this positive argument, the Athenian gives a series of negative arguments. The arguments correspond to the quick negative argument in the Timaeus that the demiurge lacks the vice of envy, phthonos. Here in the Laws the Athenian argues that the gods lacks other vices: cowardice and neglect and laziness and luxury. (900d-901a) Notice that these are vices of a particular sort. They are all vices which would prevent one from doing what one ought to do. Therefore this argument does not support the principle that the gods ought to govern the cosmos to make it as good as possible. Rather, the argument relies on that principle, which is assumed. The purpose of this argument is to show that the gods do not have certain vices which would prevent them from doing what they ought.

Notice that I am for the first time making use of the language of “ought”. “What is fully good will be beneficial” is about one good thing producing further goods. It contains no “ought”.
Perhaps the notion of care or supervision or governance—*epimeleia*—introduces an element of obligation, of “ought”. If one has care or supervision over something, one is obliged to care for and supervise it.\(^{29}\)

So far, the gods’ motives in acting to make the cosmos as good as possible are altruistic. The gods are perfectly good, so they cannot be made better off by their beneficial activity. The element of obligation introduced by *epimeleia* does not change the situation. The gods ought to care for the welfare of the cosmos, because they are good and so this is their natural function. Or, seen from another perspective, the gods’ reason—*nous*—recognizes what is good and rationally chooses it. To choose otherwise would be to go against reason.

However, an egoistic motive threatens to creep in at the next phase of the argument. The Athenian claims: “all mortal animals are the possessions (*ktēmata*) of the gods, as are the entire heavens.” (902b-9)\(^{30}\) From this he concludes, “. . . it would not befit the owners to neglect us, since they are the most conscientious (*epimelestatōi*) and best”. (902c1-2)

The claim that we are property of the gods opens the possibility of an argument from self-interest. Our property is *ours*. Damage to our property is a harm to us, as its possessors. So the gods have a self-interested motive in maintaining the cosmos and all it contains in good condition, because it is their property.

This is an intriguing argument. But it is not plausible in this context. If we are the property of the gods, we are not property that is useful to them in any way. They do not

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\(^{29}\) *prosēkei*, 901b1; *dei*, 902a3. The term for the opposite of *epimeleia*—*ameleia* or neglect—has an implication of “not doing as one should”.

\(^{30}\) This claim appears elsewhere in Plato: *Laws* 906a7; *Phaedo* 62b8; *Statesman* 271c-274d (in the myth); and it may be implied at *Critias* 109b.
need us for amusement. They do not need us to honor them. The gods are perfectly good, so they lack nothing. Unnecessary damage to some part of the cosmos could not harm the gods.

What, then, is the point of mentioning that we are the property of the gods? The points of this metaphor is to emphasize that we are their responsibility, and not someone else’s. The point is that we are their property, not that we are their property. Since we belong to the gods, they are responsible for us. Being conscientious and good, they fulfill their responsibility and care for us.

Craftsmanship

In the *Timaeus* story of the creation of the cosmos the idea of divine craftsmanship is central. The creator is described from the beginning and repeatedly as a *demiourgos*, a craftsman. Recall that Sedley and Johansen go so far as to make “being a craftsman” the essential feature which explains the Demiurge’s activity. The textual prominence of the idea makes this a plausible interpretation, even though I have argued that it is incorrect.

In the *Laws* the Athenian appeals to two particular features of craftsmanship concerning parts and wholes: First, an excellent craftsman takes care to make the object of his craft as good as possible, not just in overall structure, but down through the smallest details:

So let us never suppose that the god is inferior to mortal craftsmen who the better they are the more exactly and perfectly they execute with one art the small and the large aspects of the work that is proper to them; nor suppose that the god who is most wise and willing and able to supervise will not supervise any of the small things . . . (902e4-903a1)
Second, “every skilled craftsman does all his work for the sake of all: he makes a part straining for what is best in common, for the sake of the whole, and not the whole for the sake of the parts.” (903c5-d1)

The gods who supervise the cosmos do this, not for the sake of their own good, but rather for the welfare of the cosmos and everything in it:

The universe is put together with a view to the safety and virtue of the whole by the one who supervises the universe, and each part, to the extent that it can, does and has done to it what is fitting. [903b4-7]

As in the *Timaeus*, divine craftsmanship fits hand in glove with divine beneficence.

**Human collaboration**

The topic of this paper is divine moral psychology in the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*. What Plato’s divine moral psychology can teach us about Plato’s views of the moral psychology of mortal human being is a larger goal. One famous Platonic doctrine gives us reason to hope for a connection. If the goal of human self-improvement can be summed up as, “become like a god”\(^{32}\), then perhaps the moral psychology of a virtuous or good human being will be like divine moral psychology.

However, our *Laws* passage does draw an explicit conclusion about the relationship between divine craftsmanship and human behavior. So I will venture into the larger topic a little. The words just quoted, “each part, to the extent that it can, does and has done to it what is fitting” applies to human beings. Human beings, as parts of the cosmos, are designed to do and have done to them what is fitting for the overall welfare of the cosmos and its parts. When human beings do what is fitting for the overall welfare of the cosmos,

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\(^{31}\) Cf. Tim. 41b-c.

\(^{32}\) Most famously at Theaetetus 76b. See the now-classic study Sedley 1999.
they co-operate in the divine project of caring for the cosmos. Good rulers make their cities
good, and cooperate with the divine project by making that part of the cosmos as good as
possible. The divine craftsmen have as their main goal the welfare of the cosmos as a
whole, and they concern themselves with the welfare of the parts because of its
contribution (often: constitutive) to the goodness of the cosmos. The Athenian claims that
the individual human being should share in these divine goals.

“Even your part is one of these, stubborn man [the imagined atheist interlocutor], and it
always strains to look toward the universe, even if it is altogether small. But you have
forgotten this, that all generation exists for the sake of this: that a happy existence may
belong to the life of the universe, and it does not come to be for the sake of you, but you for
it.” (903c1-5)

With this text we enter the territory of Karl Popper’s thesis that Plato was a
totalitarian for whom the individual has no intrinsic value. I leave that issue aside, to
concentrate on the moral psychology. Clearly, the Athenian is saying that the good person
(who has not forgotten the truths he is teaching) will act so as to make the kosmos as
eudaimon as possible, insofar as he is able.

The gods who care for the cosmos are altruistic, because they do not benefit from
their actions. It is often said that the true “test case” for altruism is self-sacrifice: will the
agent sacrifice his own welfare for the sake of someone else? Divine agents cannot provide
this test case, since their goodness cannot diminish. Human agents within the cosmos can,
however, at least apparently, provide test cases: in order to cooperate in the divine project,
they might need to sacrifice their own happiness—the happiness of that part of the cosmos
which is their self—for the sake of the greater good. The Athenian says, “But you are
irritated (aganakteis), not knowing how what concerns you turn out best for the whole and for you as well, in virtue of the power of your common generation.” (903d1-3) 33

The Athenian then goes on to argue that in fact, when the nature of things is deeply understood, there is no conflict between what is good for the individual and what is good for the whole.

But: what if anything does this passage tell us about how the individual human should react if, per impossibile, there were a conflict between his interest and the interest of the kosmos? 34 What the Athenian’s remarks imply is that the (enlightened) human being will act rightly, sacrificing self-interest for the sake of the whole and cooperating in the project of the gods. This human being will be irritated, will be “grumpy”, because the self-sacrifice is regrettable and even annoying. But in this—imaginable but not actually possible—test case, the person would act rightly and altruistically, sacrificing self-interest for the whole. 35

In Plato’s Utopia Recast Chris Bobonich uses this passage as key evidence for eudaimonism in the Laws. Bobonich acknowledges that in this passage Plato gives an account that all souls have been designed to contribute to the goodness of the whole universe. 36 He correctly points out that this fact about the souls’ nature does not directly imply anything about their desires and intentions. The souls might be designed so that functionally they contribute to the good of the whole, although their desires and intentions

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33 England and Schöpsdau ad loc: have a different construal: “That condition of your affairs which is best for the universe is a success for you too . . .” This reading seems awkward, and anyway does not affect the overall sense.
34 Compare Adeimantus’ objection to Socrates at the beginning of Rep. IV.
35 Vlastos, 1991, p. 177, notes the tension between Socratic eudaimonism and Socrates’ service to a beneficial god. Vlastos does not attempt to resolve it.
are more limited. But Bobonich agrees that Plato does take the further step: it is the nature of a good soul to aim at benefitting. 37

In my view at this point Bobonich has given up the game. If the good soul has benefitting the cosmos as a basic, underived motive, then eudaimonism is false. Bobonich goes on to propose a solution to this problem: In benefitting the cosmos for the right reasons, the individual person’s soul fulfills its rational nature, which is good for it. But this solution fails. It is true that fulfilling its nature is good for a mortal soul. But we have just seen that this is not why a virtuous soul benefits the cosmos. It benefits the cosmos because it has been created in such a way that it is in its nature to want to do this.

Bobonich wants the virtuous person’s reasoning to be: “I want what is best for me. I am rational, and so promoting the good generally is a realization of my nature. So doing that is good for me. So I will do this. “

But this has an extra unneeded step. On the view presented by the Athenian at 903, if I were rational like a god, I would reason like a god. My reason would lead me to think: “This is good [for the cosmos, all things considered]. So I will do it.” Each mortal soul’s nature tend to reason in this way(τὸ πᾶν συντείνει βλέπον, 903c1). 38

In this passage, the axiom of practical rationality ascribed to mortal creatures is: to the extent you are able, collaborate with the gods in their project of making the cosmos as good as possible.

37 Bobonich cites 903b4-6 for this. In my view the decisive text comes a bit further down, at 903c1.
38 Bobonich goes on to make an extraordinary claim: “Plato never offers an argument justifying rational eudaimonism, but perhaps the closest he comes to it is in the . . . passage [903b4-d3] from Book X in Plato’s Laws. As I have argued, the passage in fact is evidence against eudaimonism. What Bobonich seems to rely on is that the passage does distinguish between the welfare of the individual and the welfare of the cosmos. Plato does not conflate the two, and he poses the question of possible conflict between the two. But there is nothing in the passage to suggest, much less justify, the thought that the rational mortal agent will prefer his own welfare to that of the whole.
Conclusion

I have argued that (1) the activity of the Demiurge in Plato's *Timaeus*, (2) the activity of Anaxagoras’ *Nous* as described by Socrates in the *Phaedo*, and (3) the activities of the gods governing the universe in *Laws* 10 all present the gods as fully rational beneficent agents. These gods act altruistically, making the world better without being themselves being benefitted. (This is ruled out because, being perfectly good, they cannot become better.)

These examples demonstrate that egoism or “eudaimonism”, understood as a principle of rational action, is a false interpretation of Plato’s texts. These examples leave open the possibility that in Plato the gods are altruistic, whereas human beings are thoroughlygoingly egoistic or “eudaemonist”. Any interpreter who holds this view owes us a detailed explanation of why this peculiar feature is true of the human species.

The approach to human ethics suggested by these texts is rather different. It is also different, in a worrying way, from the view that what human beings should aim at above all is to become similar to the gods. The approach to human ethics suggested by these texts is that our job is to be collaborators with the god or gods in their project of making the cosmos as good as possible. Anyway, this aspect of Platonic ethics seems to be under-appreciated.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


