

Eugesta

ISSN : 2265-8777

Éditeur : Université de Lille

14 | 2024

Varia

Plato on how (not) to be Born

Sara Brill

 <https://www.peren-revues.fr/eugesta/1573>

DOI : 10.54563/eugesta.1573

Référence électronique

Sara Brill, « Plato on how (not) to be Born », *Eugesta* [En ligne], 14 | 2024, mis en ligne le 17 décembre 2024, consulté le 25 février 2026. URL : <https://www.peren-revues.fr/eugesta/1573>

Droits d'auteur

CC-BY

Plato on how (not) to be Born

Sara Brill

PLAN

Nativity, Biopolitics, and the Examined Life

Instruction to the Born in Plato's *Timaeus*

Conclusion: Alienated natality and imagining birth differently

TEXTE

- 1 Hannah Arendt is rightly credited with placing human natal status at the center of an analysis of political life, with shifting the philosophical perspective, as Adriana Cavarero puts it, “from mortality as the central category of metaphysics, to natality as the central category of politics.”¹ To make this shift, Arendt saw it as necessary to break with the ancient Greek philosophers who otherwise supplied her with so much to think with, and return to a thinker who formed the subject of some of her earliest work, Augustine. She does so on the grounds that the uniqueness and novelty she associated with human birth were, by her estimation, largely absent from a cultural imaginary that tended instead to emphasize continuity and return.² The close connection between theorizing metaphysics and theorizing mortality that is drawn in Plato's various presentations of a grasp of eternal forms as a momentary transcendence of human finitude, for instance, would seem to lend credence to Arendt's assessment. From the controversial claim that philosophy is practice for death in the *Phaedo*, to the spectacles of eschatological mythologizing and the ethical lessons for living to be drawn therefrom depicted in several dialogues, to the Socratic injunction in the *Apology* that injustice should be feared rather than death, the dialogues are filled with ruminations about mortality and the oppressive character of an alienated stance toward it; i.e., the ignorance embedded in fearing death and the hubris of attempting to escape it.
- 2 And yet, the language of birth also permeates the dialogues, particularly when Plato wants to highlight the generative power he associ-

ates with philosophical thinking. And while he will indeed emphasize the recursive, circular temporality that characterizes multiple approaches to human coming-to-be throughout the ancient Mediterranean, this emphasis does not stop him from making the human natal condition—the fact of human birth from another human—of central concern to his thinking about the generativity of human actions, its philosophical and political implications, and its cosmic paradigms.³ In fact, there is a wide range and variety of uses to which Plato puts the language of birth. For one, we find reference to the material conditions of human coming-to-be as requiring both political and philosophical attention, as with the doomed nuptial number in the *Republic* and the eugenics legislation of both the *Republic* and the *Laws*.⁴ Here we find Plato willing to radically reconfigure the Greek *oikos* in ways that yield both liberatory and oppressive possibilities.⁵ Plato will also, famously, use the language of birth alongside the language of erotic entanglement to figure certain aspects of philosophy and philosophizing as like giving birth, as with the philosophical meutics of the *Theaetetus* and *Charmides*, and Diotima's description of children of the soul in the *Symposium*, which stand beside the overtly erotic language with which Plato characterizes philosophic activity in the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*.

- 3 Not only will Plato consider the facts of human birth as something philosophers need to pay attention to, and construct philosophy itself as akin to giving birth, he will also meditate upon what birth means, on how we are to think of ourselves as born, a question that also preoccupied those Greek orators embroiled in the conversations about citizen status that shaped the self-understanding of Periclean Athens.⁶ It is this aspect of Plato's thinking about birth that I will focus on here. I am especially interested in what we can learn of Plato's approach to the meaning of birth via the instruction to the born he includes in several dialogues. At times he will introduce this instruction by drawing upon mythic tropes of forms of birth other than human parturition, a tradition that includes fantastical births from sea, or the earth, or Zeus's head or thigh, in order to place human birth within a larger generative context. For instance, that it is politically and philosophically salutary to think of one's birth in a particular way is made especially clear in the famous noble lie passage from *Republic* 3 where we find Plato's Socrates imagining

what would be told to the citizens of Kallipolis in order to justify its class allocation system and encourage their love of the city. For after rigorous testing and examination, the rulers of Kallipolis will distribute citizens between three classes on the basis of whether they are suited for the demands of rule, the trials of the battlefield, or the toil of trade and physical labor. The individual propensities for each of these positions are figured as a substance, metal, present from birth, cultivated into gold, silver, and iron and bronze natures in the earth, and made known to human legislators by examination.

- 4 In the noble lie, the reproductive labor of conceiving, gestating, and birthing a child is staged in quite a different setting than the scene of parturition, refracted on to the cosmic (the god who molds souls) and the chthonic (the earth who gestates them). The deep skepticism Plato's Socrates displays toward claims of the inheritance of good character that would prove such a flashpoint in Greek debates about citizenship and physiognomy alike is dealt with in this passage by maintaining the emergence of character at birth, but removing the blood connection between birthed and birthing and replacing it with a set of capacities represented by another substance whose value has been predetermined. The vicissitudes of human reproductive life as Plato saw them, that noble fathers do not necessarily have noble sons, is addressed and human errancy is accounted for. Birth remains a site of the transmission of character by removing it from the traditional familial lineage—souls of gold character could be born to parents of silver character, who are like surrogates until the city steps in and places them in their proper location. The city, then, as instantiated in its lawgivers, is the true parent, or at least is the entity able to discern and reflect the workings of the god. Here is how this 'lineage' will be conveyed to the citizens of Kallipolis:

ἐστὲ μὲν γὰρ δὴ πάντες οἱ ἐν τῇ πόλει ἀδελφοί, ὡς φήσομεν πρὸς αὐτοὺς μυθολογοῦντες, ἀλλ' ὁ θεὸς πλάττων, ὅσοι μὲν ὑμῶν ἱκανοὶ ἄρχειν, χρυσὸν ἐν τῇ γενέσει συνέμειξεν αὐτοῖς, διὸ τιμωτάτοι εἰσιν· ὅσοι δ' ἐπικούροι, ἄργυρον· σίδηρον δὲ καὶ χαλκὸν τοῖς τε γεωργοῖς καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις δημιουργοῖς. ἅτε οὖν συγγενεῖς ὄντες πάντες τὸ μὲν πολὺ ὁμοίους ἂν ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς γεννῶτε, ἔστι δ' ὅτε ἐκ χρυσοῦ γεννηθεῖη ἂν ἀργυροῦν καὶ ἐξ ἀργύρου χρυσοῦν ἔκγονον καὶ τᾶλλα πάντα οὕτως ἐξ ἀλλήλων. τοῖς οὖν ἄρχουσι καὶ πρῶτον καὶ μάλιστα παραγγέλλει ὁ θεός, ὅπως μηδενὸς οὕτω φύλακες ἀγαθοὶ ἔσονται μηδ' οὕτω σφόδρα

φυλάξουσι μηδὲν ὡς τοὺς ἐκγόνους, ὅτι αὐτοῖς τούτων ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς παραμέμικται. (415a2-b6)

“All of you in the city are certainly brothers,’ we shall say to them in telling the tale, ‘but the god, in fashioning those of you who are competent to rule, mixed gold in at their birth; this is why they are most honored; in auxiliaries, silver; and iron and bronze in the farmers and the other craftsmen. So, because you are all related, although for the most part you’ll produce offspring like yourselves, it sometimes happens that a silver child will be born from a gold parent, a golden child from a silver parent, and similarly all the others from each other. Hence the god commands the rulers first and foremost to be of nothing such good guardians and to keep over nothing so careful a watch as the children, seeing which of these metals is mixed in their souls.”

- 5 The aim here is to bring one’s understanding of oneself as born into line with one’s standing in the city, such that one loves one’s standing as oneself. By the terms of this tale, there is no relevant part of the citizen that the city hasn’t seen and placed in the proper location.
- 6 In testing and moving citizens to the nutritive/educational context appropriate to their perceived capacities, the human legislators of Kallipolis create on the mortal plane the allocation according to character imagined in Plato’s *Laws* as occurring in the afterlife, and offered as consolation to those citizens of Magnesia who find the scale of human injustice to challenge their belief in theodicy. Such a citizen can be assured that:

ἐπεὶ δὲ ἀεὶ ψυχὴ συντεταγμένη σώματι τοτὲ μὲν ἄλλω, τοτὲ δὲ ἄλλω, μεταβάλλει παντοίας μεταβολὰς δι’ ἑαυτὴν ἢ δι’ ἑτέραν ψυχὴν, οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἔργον τῷ πεπτευτῇ λείπεται πλὴν μετατιθέναι τὸ μὲν ἄμεινον γινόμενον ἥθος εἰς βελτίω τόπον, χεῖρον δὲ εἰς τὸν χεῖρονα, κατὰ τὸ πρέπον αὐτῶν ἕκαστον, ἵνα τῆς προσηκούσης μοίρας λαγχάνῃ. (903d3-e1)

“inasmuch as soul, being conjoined now with one body, now with another, is always undergoing all kinds of changes either of itself or owing to another soul, there is left for the draughts-player no further task, save only to shift the character that grows better to a superior place, and the worse to a worse, according to what best

suits each of them, so that each may be allotted its appropriate destiny.”

- 7 The Athenian Stranger continues: because the god understood that all actions contain both good and bad, he,

ἐμηχανήσατο ποῦ κείμενον ἕκαστον τῶν μερῶν νικῶσαν ἀρετήν, ἡττωμένην δὲ κακίαν, ἐν τῷ παντὶ παρέχοι μάλιστ’ ἂν καὶ ῥᾶστα καὶ ἄριστα. μεμηχάνηται δὴ πρὸς πᾶν τοῦτο τὸ ποῖόν τι γιγνόμενον ἀεὶ ποῖαν ἔδραν δεῖ μεταλαμβάνον οἰκίζεσθαι καὶ τίνας ποτὲ τόπους· τῆς δὲ γενέσεως τοῦ ποίου τινὸς ἀφῆκε ταῖς βουλήσεσιν ἑκάστων ἡμῶν τὰς αἰτίας. ὅπῃ γὰρ ἂν ἐπιθυμῇ καὶ ὁποῖός τις ὦν τὴν ψυχὴν, ταύτη σχεδὸν ἑκάστοτε καὶ τοιοῦτος γίγνεται ἅπας ἡμῶν ὡς τὸ πολὺ. (904b4-c4)

“designed a location for each of the parts wherein it might secure the victory of goodness of the whole and the defeat of evil most completely, easily and well. For this purpose he has designed the rule which prescribes what kind of character should be set to dwell in what kind of position and in what regions; but the causes of the generation of any special kind he left to the wills of each one of us men. For according to the trend of our desires and the nature of our souls, each one of us generally becomes of a corresponding character.”

- 8 This movement, whereby τόπος (place) reflects ἦθος (character), presupposes a system or process of testing and judging in order to determine how to tell who has what kind of soul and who is suited to what kind of work. For the god of the *Laws*, this process of allocation is easy; for human legislators, imitating the god’s play is only possible via a multi-generational project of founding and revision that Plato likened to a form of painting (769b-c).⁷ For the human legislators of the *Republic* it would seem to require both the philosophical curriculum outlined in books 6 and 7 and knowledge of the biometrics described in book 10 as that for which one should neglect all other studies (618b-d). For the citizens of both Kallipolis and Magnesia, their allocation in the city requires them to think of themselves as children of the city and the god, as possessing character and capacity with larger cosmological significance, and as committing actions whose effects extend beyond any one course of life to rever-

berate through ‘all time’ (*Rep.* 608c). This is the task that is before those legislators instructing the citizens of Kallipolis about the nature and meaning of their birth in a manner that is consonant with the sense of self the city requires. As Glaucon suggests, it is a tall order; such a tale will not be believed by those to whom it is told first but if they can be persuaded to tell it nevertheless, “to their sons and their successors and the rest of the human beings who come afterwards” (415d) it might have some chance of being taken up.

- 9 In both of these dialogues, how one is to think of oneself as born has both political and philosophical implications. While we may not find the emphasis on novelty and the new that made natality so important for Arendt’s political theorizing, we do find ruminations about birth given a central place in Plato’s theorizing of the *polis*, and the demands it places on human action. Plato’s model of human ethical agency, in particular, requires a particular stance not only toward death, but also toward birth.
- 10 In short, Plato found birth good to think with and I am interested in exploring why this is the case. More specifically, I would like to delve more deeply into the claim of the generativity of human action and its implications for the human self-understanding of the status of the born by focusing on another scene of instruction. I will argue that natality provides a powerful conceptual tool for understanding Plato’s ethical theorizing by focusing in particular on the instructions to the about-to-be-born provided in a passage from the *Timaeus* (41d4-42e4). I will conclude with some broader considerations about the relationship between alienated mortality (the denial of the unavailability of death) and alienated natality (the denial of the contingency of birth), and the potentially liberatory aspects of untethering birth-giving and identity. To better see the stakes of this conversation, I will say a little more about the relationship between Plato, Arendt, and Foucault before diving into Plato’s text.

Natality, Biopolitics, and the Examined Life

- 11 Several of the most influential contemporary conceptual tools for querying the political valence of life mine ancient Greek resources to

do so. Giorgio Agamben's influential repurposing of Walter Benjamin's concept of bare life, for instance, is grounded in a distinction between ζωή (life as such) and βίος (manner of life) that he sees as already operative in Aristotle's political thought, in a reading of Aristotle the limits of which have been subject of much recent discussion.⁸ Agamben's formulation of ζωή and βίος stages an implicit conversation between Arendtian natality and Foucauldian biopolitics, both of which have also received recent critical scrutiny.⁹ Arendt's alignment of natality and action—i.e., her emphasis on second birth, on the emergence of the individual on the stage of human plurality, rather than on the material conditions of the emergence of a human being from another human being—renders deeply unclear the relationship between natality and the material conditions of birth, and I share Adriana Cavarero's concern that this has left us with a concept of natality whose centrality is also marked by a certain under-theorization.¹⁰ Thus, Arendt will read, for instance, what many see as a primary scene of sexual differentiation—that is, the biblical presentation of the creation of Eve from the rib of Adam—as rather the scene of human plurality, leaving uncommented upon the asymmetry of the tale, that Eve is made from a part of Adam and for the sake of providing companionship to him.¹¹

- 12 This focus on second birth opens Arendt to the critique of participating in a longstanding historical erasure of the maternal.¹² Her reasons for this focus are complex, historically bound, and important to mark—to avoid a particular and pernicious kind of biologism. As a growing body of feminist scholarship has observed, it is also necessary to avoid ceding birth to 'the biological' so conceived in order to avoid missing an important point of resistance to the reduction of potentially pregnant people to reproductive service, emphasizing self-construction at the expense of the other-construction that precedes it, and overlooking the potentially liberatory force of imagining birth differently.¹³ A reductive model consigns reproductive labor to the biologism Arendt was trying to avoid, and makes little room for the analysis of the fantasies of birth that inform the motivated ignorance that biologically more precise language about human reproduction is attempting to correct. In the wake of the absence of such efforts, oppressive imaginaries proliferate and are naturalized, while alternative ways of figuring birth wither.

- 13 We see a similar critical awareness of the limits of biopolitics to adequately theorize contemporary forms of oppression, a limit well-observed by an established body of feminist, anticolonial, and critical race theory scholarship.¹⁴ What this scholarship suggests is especially evident in the experience of colonized peoples, for instance, is not only the ‘making live’ of biopolitics, but also the active use of death for genocidal aims, and theorists have thus offered terms like ‘thanatopolitics,’ necropolitics, and ‘necroresistance’ as better conceptual tools for theorizing and resisting colonial power, and for addressing the social death of slavery following a general conceptual model offered by Orlando Patterson, whose documentation of the role of natal alienation in large-scale projects of human enslavement and colonization also established a mode of inquiry that would prove essential to efforts to show how the use of birth connects white supremacy and structural misogyny.¹⁵
- 14 To listen to the theorizers of thanatopolitics and necropolitics is to hear the decisive role of mortality, the use of death, as a political principle whose centrality to colonialism shows the limitations of a solely biopolitical lens; to follow the strand of Black feminist thought querying reproductive politics and developing reproductive justice is to discern the line connecting natality to establishing the ontological status of ‘human’ being. As this work makes clear, neither biopolitics nor Arendtian natality can adequately assess to what humans are committed on the basis of their status as born; both leave under-investigated the fantasies about birth that prove decisive in shaping how one takes up one’s status as born.
- 15 Like Arendt, Foucault is less interested in theorizing the material conditions of human birth than in the conditions for self-construction, that is, he is less interested in ‘first’ birth than in ‘second,’ and like Arendt this interest is governed in part by concern about the nefarious effects of biologism. At the same time, biopolitics receives its most dense articulation not in Foucault’s own work but in that of his commentators and other scholars inspired by his work. For his own part, Foucault turned rather quickly from biopolitics to governmentality, which also included a shift of attention away from Greek antiquity.¹⁶ In Foucault’s later return to Greek antiquity, the concept of βίος finds revolutionary force less in its usefulness to a notion of biopolitics (in bio-) than in τέχνη τοῦ βίου (an art of living),

i.e. in its value for an ethical/political project of living otherwise, and thus in an alignment with alterity, novelty, and the new that draws him into the sphere of this other thinker of the political significance of novelty.

- 16 To put a finer point on their convergences, for Arendt, to be born is to be a source of action, that is, a source of the novel, the unexpected, the new, and thus able to accept the demand and promise of political life. For Foucault, political life also includes the capacity to create novel ways of life and thus to carve out a livable life in the face of unliveable conditions. Plato too attended to the conditions of unlivable life; the centrality of βίος is staked in what is perhaps the most well-known expressions of the Platonic Socrates—the unexamined life is not worth living—and reiterated in other of his most widely read dialogues; e.g., the *Republic* concludes by presenting the greatest task and risk of humankind to be discerning the better from the worst βίος and choosing accordingly. For Aristotle as well βίος is a primary philosophical object, his investigation of it tracks across zoological, political, and ethical texts.¹⁷ In the political theories of both ancient Greek thinkers, βίος finds its practical force as an adherence to type, and serves as a regulative ideal, marking out an ethical-political project that involves formal legislation, conventional codes of behavior, bodily regulation, spiritual supervision, surveillance, and tropes of naturalization and denaturalization for the sake of realizing a cosmological ideal. To follow this understanding of βίος is to observe a whole host of forms of training in thought, action, and desire, not only in how to live a life of a certain kind, but in how to think of oneself as alive, as born. In the case of Plato, this training amounts to developing the capacity to choose one's βίος well, and Plato often illustrates the stakes of this choosing by connecting the choice of a manner of life with the very terms of embodiment. In Plato's eschatological myths, choosing a βίος is also choosing a body, and thus deciding the terms of one's birth, or, for a philosophic few, being liberated from embodiment by returning to one's cosmic origin.¹⁸ The uncanniness of Socrates, the he is both citizen and stranger to Athens, is presented alongside a recurrent description of philosophy as a return to a cosmic scene of the reception of truth. Such a presentation of the philosopher's life troubles the asso-

ciation between alterity and novelty. By these terms, the alterity of the philosophic life is also return, and the love of wisdom a nostalgia.

- 17 It is no wonder, then, that Arendt and Foucault diverge on the question of the usefulness of Greek antiquity for thinking through the political significance of natality, understood as the condition for the novelty of human action. For while Arendt arrives at the new, marked in Augustin's formulation *initium ut esset homo creates est* (that a beginning be made, human was created) on the basis of a break between Greek antiquity and early Christianity, and while Foucault as well is interested in observing differences between Christian practices of confession and Socratic parrhesia, he sees these differences less as a decisive shift than as a process of transformation. As Allen Miller demonstrates, what we find in Foucault's investigation of frank speech is not a radical break between Socratic and Christian truth-telling practices but rather, "a gradual repurposing of certain discursive techniques that elaborate a model of the self and its loss in relation to different material and theoretical contexts, elaborations that produce new forms of subjectivity and new relations of that subjectivity to truth, both its own and that of others."¹⁹ Just how are we to read the emphasis on novelty, these new subjectivities and relations to truth, in the context of a posited continuity between ancient Greek and early Christian theorizing? Is the alterity of life, its otherness, as presented by Socrates, or the Cynics, or Antigone, adequately captured by describing it as novel or new?
- 18 Arendt motivates her return to Augustin specifically on the grounds that the faith and hope she sees as bestowed by the full experience of natality are, "two essential characteristics of human existence which Greek antiquity ignored altogether."²⁰ In voicing her agreement with this turn, Cavarero adds, "The Greeks, obviously, did not ignore the fact that men are born; however, in contrast to the Christian tradition, they did not produce an imagery—or what we could call a vast iconological and literary repertoire—on birth."²¹ While I agree that there is little in the way of the ubiquity of Madonna and child, we do have a visual and literary record that includes deep, sustained meditation on the status of human beings as born, and on the ethical and political implications of and possibilities opened by this status.

- 19 Plato's work provides us with a particularly rich example. In his efforts to carve out the love of wisdom as an alternative form of life to the love of pleasure and the love of honor, he constructed a βίος whose access to truth also gains access to a generative power with implications for embodiment and birth, complicating the distance between first and second birth. This has both liberating and oppressive possibilities. To use the famous first wave of the *Republic* as an example—i.e., Socrates' call that men and women be trained together on the grounds that the differential division of reproductive labor is not a relevant difference in the city (454d-e)—in untethering political role from reproductive role, Plato displaced sexual difference from determining the access to political power granted to philosophical rulers. In following this up with the assertion that, as a kind, the γένος (kind) of women' is constitutively weaker (read: weaker from birth) in all things than men (455c-e), he reinscribed a central tenet of patriarchy. The tension between these aspects of his reconfiguration of the Greek οἶκος (household) has long been a point of contention; my point here is simply that the liberating potential for guardian women of education and political participation does not come with liberation from an essentialist understanding of their 'kind', and is purchased by maintaining the relegation of reproductive labor to an extra-political sphere. Under these conditions, citizens will navigate their status as born at some remove from the material conditions of their coming-to-be, and from the labor and care their successful maturation required, labor and care that, to return to the terms of the noble lie, they have been encouraged to think of as ὥσπερ ὄνειρα (like dreams) (414d).²²
- 20 In this, Plato's political theorizing too risks adopting and promoting an alienated stance towards one's condition as born, particularly, as I argue below, with respect to the radical contingency of birth.²³ For if acknowledgment of the absolute necessity of death forms a key element of human self-understanding, so too must acknowledgment of the absolute lack of necessity of one's birth. One is not owed birth, nor is one's birth an event for one; as Anne O'Byrne observes, there is a temporal lag between the reproductive labor that produces humans and any one human's understanding of their birth.²⁴ And yet in several dialogues we find that Plato's efforts to describe the philosophical life include a claim that human action must be viewed within

the context of ‘all time,’ wherein one’s birth is seen as a function of the cosmic effects of one’s actions, such that one deserves the conditions under which and station into which one is born. In this context, ‘liberation’ from re-birth is imagined as reward for a certain kind of exemplary philosophic life. Souls can be instructed, then, not only in how to be born but also in how not to be born. I will explore this tension further with a focus on the claim for human generativity made in a crucial passage in the *Timaeus*, in which immortal souls about to be born into mortal bodies are instructed by their creator on the conditions of their new life.

Instruction to the Born in Plato’s *Timaeus*

- 21 One of Plato’s most vivid portrayals of the generative capacity of human action is offered in his *Timaeus*, wherein we read that the very existence of women and non-human animals is a function of the actions of the first generation of humans. Speaking in the oracular pronunciation peculiar to *Timaeus*’s charge, he observes:

καὶ ὁ μὲν εὖ τὸν προσήκοντα χρόνον βιούς, πάλιν εἰς τὴν τοῦ συννόμου πορευθεὶς οἴκησιν ἄστρον, βίον εὐδαίμονα καὶ συνήθη ἔξοι, σφαλεῖς δὲ τούτων εἰς γυναικὸς φύσιν ἐν τῇ δευτέρᾳ γενέσει μεταβαλοῖ· μὴ παυόμενός τε ἐν τούτοις ἔτι κακίας, τρόπον ὃν κακύνοιτο, κατὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα τῆς τοῦτρόπου γενέσεως εἰς τινα τοιαύτην ἀεὶ μεταβαλοῖ θῆριον φύσιν. (42b3–c4)

“And he who has lived well throughout his appropriate time would make his way back to the dwelling of his lawful star and would have a life that was happy and habitual to him. But he who failed to live well would, in his second birth, take on woman’s nature. If in that form he still did not refrain from evil, then in whatever mode he might make himself bad, he would always take on some such bestial nature in the similitude of that mode of life that was born in him.”

- 22 The complexities that arise from this outrageous claim that women and non-human animals come-to-be from the moral failings of a masculine human prototype has been subject of much scholarly scrutiny.²⁵ I would like to focus on the place of this model of

generativity between two others: that of the fecund workings of the divine demiurge, both father and maker, πατήρ (father) and ποιητής (maker) and that of sexual reproduction, whose introduction after the creation of women marks it as a third kind, drawing it into the complex interpretive horizon of the role of χώρα (place).²⁶ By these terms, human is a generative kind. The first generation of humans will ‘give birth’ to actions, which shape souls that will eventually make their way into a next generation of bodies suited to their condition, either human men or human women, and from there will, *via* their actions, determine the lives of subsequent generations as well as their bodies; i.e., whether they will be other men and women or other land animals, or animals of the sea or sky. We thus could not say of Plato what Aristotle accuses other philosophers of doing i.e., putting any soul into any body (DA 407b12-26); rather, in this dialogue and several others, we get the bodies we deserve.²⁷

- 23 Here, I would like to consider the approach to natality that is embedded within the impulse to locate human coming to be from another human in some mythic time—and thus as having an origin, and one that is not co-extensive with the origin of human beings (humans came to be differently in another ‘time’)—which draws the *Timaeus* into the mythic framework of the myth of the two ages in the *Statesman*, the myth of Er in the *Republic*, the myth of the true earth in the *Phaedo*, the great myth of the *Protagoras*, all of which are themselves playing with Hesiod and other poets, and with the much larger trope of autochthony that hangs over Athenian self-definition in a variety of guises.²⁸ In the *Timaeus*, we see this impulse connected to the entire approach to embodiment, which, in the case of human being is a matter of inserting the celestial and eternal orbits of the immortal soul into the ebb and flood, the gushing, streaming, flowing, of mortal life and mortal body, a process that also charts the aspirational horizon of human living (the very sense in which it can be said to live well or fail to do so): bringing this streaming flow forward into the circular orbits of the same, and disclosing too the temporal horizon of return to origin.²⁹ Like the stars into which these souls are sown, human βίος is imagined as an orbit, as completing a cycle that will begin again. Consequently, below I focus on Plato’s depiction of the process by which the mortal

human kind is brought into being, and consider its larger implications for his understanding of natality, generativity, and birth.

- 24 Having finally constructed all the gods, the divine demiurge, “the begetter of this all [ὁ τόδε τὸ πᾶν γεννήσας]” (41a5), addresses them and demonstrates to them the terms of their existence. As works born from him, their craftsman and father [ὧν ἐγὼ δημιουργὸς πατήρ τε ἔργων, δι’ ἐμοῦ γενόμενα (6-7)], they are neither immortal [ἀθάνατοι] nor entirely indissoluble [οὐδ’ ἄλυτοι τὸ πάμπαν]; that is, their father, and, it would seem, their father alone, could dissolve them. But the demiurge immediately follows this up with the assurance that he will not do so, as only one who is bad would willingly dissolve something beautifully joined together; moreover, they have a noble task to attend to: “yet in no way shall you suffer this very dissolution, nor shall you happen to meet with the doom of death, since through my will you have been allotted a bond greater still and more lordly than those bonds with which you, when born, were bound together [οὐτι μὲν δὴ λυθήσεσθε γε οὐδὲ τεύξεσθε θανάτου μοίρας, τῆς ἐμῆς βουλήσεως μείζονος ἔτι δεσμοῦ καὶ κυριωτέρου λαχόντες ἐκείνων οἷς ὅτ’ ἐγίγνεσθε συνεδεῖσθε]” (41b3-6). Their task, what belongs to them, the bond they have been allotted, is to help complete the cosmos by constructing the remainder of the three mortal kinds, which have remained “unbegotten” [ἀγέννητα], after the demiurge has handed them the immortal part of human soul.
- 25 The intercession of his sons here is necessary as, on the one hand, the cosmos cannot be left without mortal living beings, as then it would be incomplete and imperfect [ἀτελής], and, on the other, “if through me these kinds did come to be and partake of life, they would be made equal to the gods [δι’ ἐμοῦ δὲ ταῦτα γενόμενα καὶ βίου μετασχόντα θεοῖς ἰσάζοιτ’ ἅν]” (41ac2-3). And so, the demiurge will create that part of the soul which would be called divine, “and which has authority within those always willing to follow the just way and yourselves” (6-8) and will hand it down to them “after I’ve sown it and made a beginning [σπείρας καὶ ὑπαρξάμενος]” (8). They, in turn, are charged with taking this part up and in accordance with nature, turning to the crafting of animals, “imitating my power in giving you birth [μιμούμενοι τὴν ἐμὴν δύναμιν περὶ τὴν ὑμετέραν γένεσιν]” (5-6): “But as for the part that remains, do you, by interweaving mortal with immortal, go about fashioning and begetting animals; and make them

grow by giving them nourishment, and when they've withered away, receive them back unto yourselves [τὸ δὲ λοιπὸν ὑμεῖς, ἀθανάτων θνητὸν προσυφαίνοντες, ἀπεργάζεσθε ζῶα καὶ γεννᾶτε τροφήν τε διδόντες αὐξάνετε καὶ φθίνοντα πάλιν δέχεσθε]" (41d1-3).

- 26 The Demiurge's address to his divine sons anticipates several aspects of human natality that will be brought out in greater detail in the passage that follows: humans will have some direct connection to the divine demiurge *via* a part of their souls, but will have bodies and other parts of their soul modeled by the sons of the demiurge, who will also be tasked with providing them some guidance in the course of their lives. We also know their lives will end (waste away, a form of φθίω), and that this end will also have the character of a return. That is, we know the condition of their birth (divine construction, interweaving), the task of their lives (to pursue justice by granting authority to the immortal part of their soul), and the character of their end (a return). All of these are elaborated upon in the passage the follows, and that will be the focus of our attention.

Ταῦτ' εἶπε, καὶ πάλιν ἐπὶ τὸν πρότερον κρατῆρα, ἐν ᾧ τὴν τοῦ παντὸς ψυχὴν κεραννὺς ἔμισγεν, τὰ τῶν πρόσθεν ὑπόλοιπα κατεχεῖτο μίσγων τρόπον μὲν τινα τὸν αὐτόν, ἀκήρατα δὲ οὐκέτι κατὰ ταῦτ' ὡσαύτως, ἀλλὰ δεῦτερα καὶ τρίτα. συστήσας δὲ τὸ πᾶν διεῖλεν ψυχὰς ἰσαριθμούς τοῖς ἄστροις, ἔνειμ' ἐκάστην πρὸς ἕκαστον, καὶ ἐμβιβάσας ὡς ἐς ὄχημα τὴν τοῦ παντὸς φύσιν ἔδειξεν, νόμους τε τοὺς εἰμαρμένους εἶπεν αὐταῖς, ὅτι γένεσις πρώτη μὲν ἔσοιτο τεταγμένη μία πᾶσιν, ἵνα μή τις ἐλαττοῖτο ὑπ' αὐτοῦ, δέοι δὲ σπαρείσας αὐτὰς εἰς τὰ προσήκοντα ἐκάσταις ἕκαστα ὄργανα χρόνων φῦναι ζῶων τὸ θεοσεβέστατον, διπλῆς δὲ οὗσης τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως, τὸ κρεῖττον τοιοῦτον εἶη γένος ὃ καὶ ἔπειτα κεκλήσοιτο ἀνὴρ. ὁπότε δὴ σώμασιν ἐμφυτευθεῖεν ἐξ ἀνάγκης, καὶ τὸ μὲν προσίοι, τὸ δ' ἀπίοι τοῦ σώματος αὐτῶν, πρῶτον μὲν αἰσθησιν ἀναγκαῖον εἶη μίαν πᾶσιν ἐκ βιαιῶν παθημάτων σύμφυτον γίνεσθαι, δεῦτερον δὲ ἡδονῇ καὶ λύπῃ μεμειγμένον ἔρωτα, πρὸς δὲ τούτοις φόβον καὶ θυμὸν ὅσα τε ἐπόμενα αὐτοῖς καὶ ὅποσα ἐναντίως πέφυκε διεστηκότα· ὧν εἰ μὲν κρατήσοιεν, δίκη βιώσοιντο, κρατηθέντες δὲ ἀδικία. καὶ ὁ μὲν εὖ τὸν προσήκοντα χρόνον βιούς, πάλιν εἰς τὴν τοῦ συννόμου πορευθεὶς οἴκησιν ἄστρου, βίον εὐδαίμονα καὶ συνήθη ἔξοι, σφαλεῖς δὲ τούτων εἰς γυναικὸς φύσιν ἐν τῇ δευτέρᾳ γενέσει μεταβαλοῖ· μὴ πανόμενός τε ἐν τούτοις ἔτι κακίας, τρόπον ὃν κακύνοιτο, κατὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα τῆς τοῦ τρόπου γενέσεως εἰς τινα τοιαύτην ἀεὶ μεταβαλοῖ θήρειον φύσιν, ἀλλάττων τε οὐ πρότερον

πόνων λήξοι, πρὶν τῇ ταύτῳ καὶ ὁμοίου περιόδῳ τῇ ἐν αὐτῷ
 συνεπισπώμενος τὸν πολὺν ὄχλον καὶ ὕστερον προσφύντα ἐκ πυρὸς
 καὶ ὕδατος καὶ ἀέρος καὶ γῆς, θορυβώδη καὶ ἄλογον ὄντα, λόγῳ
 κρατήσας εἰς τὸ τῆς πρώτης καὶ ἀρίστης ἀφίκοιτο εἶδος ἕξεως.
 διαθεσμοθετήσας δὲ πάντα αὐτοῖς ταῦτα, ἵνα τῆς ἔπειτα εἴῃ κακίας
 ἐκάστων ἀναίτιος, ἔσπειρεν τοὺς μὲν εἰς γῆν, τοὺς δ' εἰς σελήνην, τοὺς
 δ' εἰς τᾶλλα ὅσα ὄργανα χρόνου· τὸ δὲ μετὰ τὸν σπόρον τοῖς νέοις
 παρέδωκεν θεοῖς σώματα πλάττειν θνητά, τὸ τ' ἐπίλοιπον, ὅσον ἔτι ἦν
 ψυχῆς ἀνθρωπίνης δέον προσγενέσθαι, τοῦτο καὶ πάνθ' ὅσα ἀκόλουθα
 ἐκείνοις ἀπεργασαμένους ἄρχειν, καὶ κατὰ δύναμιν ὅτι κάλλιστα καὶ
 ἄριστα τὸ θνητὸν διακυβερνᾶν ζῶον, ὅτι μὴ κακῶν αὐτὸ ἐαυτῷ
 γίγνοιτο αἴτιον. (41d4-42e4)

“Thus he spoke, and once again into the former bowl in which he had blended and mixed the soul of the all he proceeded to pour what was left over from the previous ingredients, mixing it in somewhat the same mode, yet unblended no longer to the same extent but rather in second and third degree of purity. And when he had combined all of it, he divided it up into souls equal in number to the stars and assigned each soul to each star; and having mounted them, as it were, in a chariot, he showed them the nature of the all. He told them the laws of destiny: how the first birth ordered for all would be one, in order that no one might be slighted by him; and how, once he had sown them, each in his own appropriate organ of time, they would have to sprout into the most god-fearing of animals; and how, human nature being twofold, the superior part would be a kind which at a later point would be called Man. Now when, by necessity, they should be implanted in bodies and made subject to whatever might come into and go out of their body, here's what would necessarily happen. First, there would be sensation, one and the same for all of them and innate, arising from forceful affections; and second, erotic love mixed with pleasure and pain; and in addition to these, terror and anger and whatever goes along with them and all such things that by nature tend to be contrary and set at odds with each other. If they were to master these, they would live in justice, but if they were mastered by them, then in injustice. And he who has lived well throughout his appropriate time would make his way back to the dwelling of his lawful star and would have a life that was happy and habitual to him. But he who had failed to live well would, in his second birth, take on a woman's nature. If in that form he still did not refrain from evil, then in whatever mode he might make himself bad, he would always take on some such bestial nature in the similitude of

that mode of life that was born in him. And he would keep changing and would not cease from his labors until he had reached the following point: not before he should draw along with the circuit of the same and similar that was in himself the vast mob of fire and water and air and earth that had later grown over it and, having mastered by reason that roaring and irrational mob, reach the form of his first and best condition. And after he had laid all these strictures on them, in order that he might be blameless of the future evil from each of them, he went about sowing some in the Earth, some in the Moon, some in all the other organs of time. And after this sowing, he handed down to the young gods the task of modeling mortal bodies, and—once they had fashioned whatever was left over of human soul that still had to be added, along with all that this entailed—of ruling and steering the mortal animal in the most beautiful and best way as far as they were able, except in so far as it itself might become a cause of evils for itself.”

- 27 The manner of the construction of the soul that will animate mortal bodies is outside of its awareness. The demiurge returns to the mixing bowl he used to mix the soul of the all, and takes what was left over of the ingredients of world soul, mixing it in a similar manner, but with ingredients that were, “in second and third degree of purity” (41d7). Kalkavage notes Taylor’s observation that the immortal part of human soul, then, is not made from world soul, but from remnants of the same stuff, that is, the immortal part of the human soul is not child of world soul, but sibling, lesser, debased perhaps, but still in a direct causal relation to the demiurge itself, who is its father, not its grandfather.³⁰ Thus, it is the demiurge himself who performs the generative actions, which are: mixing/combining, dividing, and assigning. As we will see, each of these actions is reiterated at essential moments on the account and will have important existential echoes: the combining as a kind of equalizing, the dividing as a kind of pluralizing, and the assigning as a hierarchizing, a putting into place on the basis of value.³¹
- 28 What, then, does the disembodied immortal part of the human soul know? As with his divine children, the demiurge offers instruction to the immortal part of the human soul. In terms resonant with the *Phaedrus*, Timaeus describes the vision of the cosmos he offers these ‘lesser’ children: “and having mounted them, as it were, in a chariot, he showed [ἔδειξεν] them the nature of the all” (41e1-2). This showing

is accompanied by a speaking: “He told them the laws of destiny [νόμους τε τοὺς εἰμαρμένους εἶπεν αὐταῖς]” (41e2-3);³² that is, he explained to them their due, their allotment, what belongs to them. Here, human birth is subject to three laws of destiny which chart out, among many other things, an approach to natality as an existential principle and develop three dimensions of it: equality, plurality, and duality. The demiurge explains:

a) “how the first birth ordered for all would be one, in order that no one might be slighted by him;”

b) “and how, once he had sown them, each in his own appropriate organ of time, they would have to sprout into the most god-fearing of animals;”

c) “and how, human nature being twofold, the superior part would be a kind which at a later point would be called Man” (41e2-42a3).

a) While these souls will likely be subject to many generations of birth, the first birth is one for all; that is, the first birth introduces the condition of equality, and it is this condition that allows for ethical agency: what is not up to the souls—their first birth—sets the conditions under which things will be up to them, namely their second birth. Further, the first birth locates ethical agency in a potent, generative (reproductive) capacity: the second and subsequent births will be a function of/reflect the decisions and actions of the first generation. That is, one’s first origin also establishes one as an origin, as an originator. Timaeus goes out of his way to assert that the god sows as he does in order to be exempt from blame for the poor actions available to the 1st generation of humans. Equality will also create need for another form of causality, then, insofar as the purpose of equality is to limit that of which the demiurge is responsible, that for which he is the cause. So, it would seem we could also say that the necessary cause enters here, and indeed, Timaeus invokes necessity when he turns to describe what happens once the souls are embodied (42a4).

b) One’s maturation is determined by a horizon; one’s living will be oriented toward living well, and this dimension establishes piety as that horizon, as that which distinguishes living well from living poorly. The mastering or being mastered that constitutes justice and

injustice in a few lines is seen as falling under the umbrella of pious action.

c) The task of living as a human is complicated by a hierarchy in the soul's human embodied condition; in a sense this is an elaboration on b) insofar as the division between living well and living poorly is given greater existential weight because it is now written onto the body *via* the emergence of sexual difference. This stipulation would seem to also introduce sexual reproduction, and thus to add a third generative dimension (1st: divine creation (sowing, mixing, etc.); 2nd: human action (god-fearing or not, just or not, mastering or being mastered); 3rd: sexual reproduction) and to do so in such a way as to suggest that parturition is just a transition from one nurturing environment to the next, simply the path by which the third generation of humans will be born, their sex and species sorted out not in the womb but in the actions of the previous generations. The uterus, then, would simply be the place of imprint, which furthers the connection between this third kind of generative activity and the work of χώρα.³³

- 29 Next, Timaeus expands and elaborates on each of these conditions/allotments by describing what will happen when, by necessity, they are “implanted in bodies, and made subject to whatever might come into and go out of their body” (42a4). To be embodied is to be subject to a certain kind of motion, in-flow and out-flow, ebb and flood. And once this happens to the souls, they can expect to experience, first, sensation/perception, αἴσθησις, “one and the same for all of them and innate, arising from forceful affections;” second, “erotic love mixed with pleasure and pain;” and in addition, “terror and anger and whatever goes along with them and all such things that by nature tend to be contrary and set at odds with one another.” This account of embodiment, of what it means to become subject to a body itself undergoing in-flow and out-low, repeats and expands upon the three existential aspects of natality above. In his emphasis on the sensation as one and the same for all, Timaeus draws αἴσθησις into the field of the equality of the first birth, but adds that this particular form of inflow involves being subject to violent affections [βιαιῶν παθημάτων]; eros, pleasure, and pain mark what we must contend with well if we are to lead good (read: god-loving) lives and also introduce us to the affections that arise from the threat of the loss of love:

anger, terror, etc. both of which are especially charged in the context of a model of masculinity that requires one to navigate them with courage and so thus evoke, like the many other opposites and contraries, what appears to have been understood as a foundational contrary of sexual difference, as we see when Timaeus turns to set out the task and end of human life:

“If they were to master these, they would live in justice, but if they were mastered by them, then in injustice. And he who has lived well throughout his appropriate time would make his way back to the dwelling of his lawful star and would have a life that was happy and habitual to him. But he who had failed to live well would, in his second birth, take on a woman’s nature. If in that form he still did not refrain from evil, then in whatever mode he might make himself bad, he would always take on some such bestial nature in the similitude of that mode of life that was born in him. And he would keep changing and would not cease from his labors until he had reached the following point: not before he should draw along with the circuit of the same and similar that was in himself the vast mob of fire and water and air and earth that had later grown over it and, having mastered by reason that roaring and irrational mob, reach the form of his first and best condition”. (42b2-42d2)

- 30 Let us ask again, then, returning now to the frame of the inquiry and thus to the position on natality voiced in this account, what does the disembodied soul know? It knows its origin *via* the path to return, that is, it has some sense for its comic origin insofar as this is the place to which it is striving to return. It is not clear whether it also understands the mechanics of its creation, the mixing, dividing, and assigning. It also knows itself as originator, as a causal force, generative of other animal kinds by the fecund capacity of its actions and their inexorable effects. It knows the task of its life, and the aspiration for return, the horizon by which it will know if it has lived well or poorly. And the immortal part of the human soul knows it must prove itself master, or risk repeated and increasingly diminishing re-embodiment.
- 31 Perhaps, in its understanding of the task of mastering the ‘vast mob’ of earth, and fire, and air, and water that clings to it, it has some intimation of the loss of all this knowledge. For the soul of the mortal animal is also consigned to forget. The process of embodiment will so

confuse and disorient it, it will, for a time at least, not even know up from down, much less its comic origins and possibility for return (44a7-b1). Its capacity for equilibrium hinges on the glimpses and glimmers of its origin that embodied life affords, and several of Plato's dialogues offer images of these glimpses, e.g., the diremption of self that is risked in the mania of erotic love evoked by the face of the beautiful described in the *Phaedrus*, the confusion created by an attempt to resolve contradiction by sense perception alone in the *Phaedo*, the evocation to thinking that arises from something as banal as the measuring of the length of a finger in the *Republic*, all moments of stillness in an otherwise roaring, gushing, streaming, flowing, shaking, turning, transforming existence. By these terms, to know oneself as born is to know oneself as containing a forgotten kernel of truth that, if one is lucky, one will spend one's life trying to remember.

Conclusion: Alienated natality and imagining birth differently

32 The gap between parturition and self-understanding (a gap that is lived and ongoing, to the extent that one may never completely be known by oneself) is often thematized as the gap between first and second birth. As we have seen, Plato complicates this distinction, marking human parturition not as first but as a distant third to the first order of divine creation, and the second order of the generativity of human action, in imitation of divine creation. By these terms, the material conditions of human coming to be, like the products of the poets, are a third degree from the truth. This alignment of human birth and poetry is not an accidental byproduct of Plato's ontology, but rather a common trope, known to Aristotle as well, who makes use of it for theorizing the nature of friendship and the duties of parent and child. If human birth is an echo of a more divine, more powerful generativity, that generativity can also be claimed not only for poetic production but also for ethical agency and for philosophical thinking, for the 'children' as Plato's Diotima puts, that are one's actions and thoughts.

33 Plato's emphasis on the generative capacity of human action brings his theorizing closer to the self-making capacity of political life than

Arendt may have recognized, and brings with it the potential for liberation that Plato reserves for the philosophic life, whose pursuit of truth extends beyond the bounds of the self, the family, and the city. At the same time, the hyperourian intellectual intensity of the philosophical life as he figures it belongs to a very small kind who are not encouraged to see themselves as born from anything other than a love of wisdom, and whose cosmic trajectory is figured as liberation from birth.

- 34 And here we can also identify traces of the dangers of an alienated stance toward natality, the oppressive possibilities of failing to take up one's status as born, the fear of the vulnerability of birth, the aspiration to come to be in some other way, and the tendency to elide natality with mortality. But the existential horizons marked by birth and death have some significant differences.³⁴ The anomalous conditions dramatized in Euripides *Alcestis* notwithstanding, no one can die another's death—Admetus' effort to escape death is scandalous, this is part of what makes it good subject matter for tragedy—and in this sense all humans die alone, no matter who is 'in the room,' so to speak. But no one is born alone, and 'my' birth is not really an experience for me but something I grasp first as fantasy, nor is it 'mine' because the 'I' that is born is only an 'I' virtually, and becomes such only with time. And while human death is absolutely necessary, there is absolutely nothing necessary about human birth; one is not meant to be, but rather comes to be from a conjunction of others actions, effects, and affects, and could also simply not have been. To take a clear-eyed stance toward natality, then, requires acknowledging the radical contingency of human coming-to-be.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

Agamben, G. (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. D. Heller-Roazen. Stanford.

Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago.

Bar On, B. (1993) *Engendering Origins: Critical Feminist Readings in Plato and*

Aristotle. New York.

Bargu, B (2014) *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*. Oxford.

Bathrellou, E. and K. Vlassopoulos (2022) *Greek and Roman Slavery*. Blackwell.

- Bianchi, E. (2014) *The Feminine Symptom: Aleatory Matter in the Aristotelian Cosmos*. Fordham.
- Bodel, J. and W. Scheidel (eds.) (2016) *On Human Bondage: After Slavery and Social Death*. New York.
- Boys-Stones, G. (2021) "Begotten and Made: Creation as Cosmogony in Middle Platonism." In *Cosmology and Biology in Ancient Philosophy*. Ed. R. Salles, 85-100, Cambridge.
- Brill, S. (2013) *Plato on the Limits of Human Life*. Indiana University Press.
- Brill, S. 2015 "Animality and Sexual Difference in Plato's *Timaeus*." In *Plato's Animals*. Ed. J. Bell and M. Naas, 161-76, Bloomington.
- Brill, S. (2020a) *Aristotle on the Concept of Shared Life*. Oxford.
- Brill, S. (2020b) "The Body as Sign and Spectacle." *The Philosopher* 108(3): 34-38.
- Brill, S. (forthcoming) "Animal and World in Heidegger and Aristotle." In *Heidegger and the Classics*. Ed. A. Turner. SUNY Press.
- Broadie, S. (2014) *Nature and Divinity and Plato's Timaeus*. Cambridge.
- Cavarero, A. (2014) "A child has been born unto us:" Arendt on Birth." Trans S. Guslandi and C. Bruhns. *philoSOPHIA* 4(1):12-30.
- Cornford, F. (1937) *Plato's Cosmology*. Indianapolis.
- Diprose, R. and E. Ziarek (2018) *Arendt, Natality and Biopolitics: Toward a Democratic Plurality and Reproductive Justice*. Edinburgh.
- Derrida, J. (1997) "Chora." Trans. I. McCloud. In *Chora L Works: Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman*. Ed. J. Kipnis and T. Leiser, 15-32, New York.
- Deutscher, P. 2017. *Foucault's Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason*. Columbia.
- Dubreuil, L. (2006) "Leaving Politics: Bios, Zōē, Life." *Diacritics* 36: 83-98.
- Faraone, C. (2011) "Magical and Medical Approaches to the Wandering Womb in the Ancient Greek World." *Classical Antiquity* 30(1): 1-32.
- Finkelberg, A. (1996) "Plato's Method in *Timaeus*." *American Journal of Philology* 117, no. 3: 391-409.
- Finlayson, J. (2010) "'Bare Life' and Politics in Agamben's Reading of Aristotle." *Review of Politics* 72(1): 97-126.
- Fletcher, E. (2016) "Aisthēsis, Reason and Appetite in the *Timaeus*." *Phronesis* 61, no. 4: 397-434.
- Forsdyke, S. (2012) "'Born from the Earth:' the Political Uses of an Athenian Myth." *Journal of Ancient and Near Eastern Religions*. 12(1): 119-141.
- Foucault, M. (2003) *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976*. Trans. D. Macey. Pallgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (2009) *Security Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978*. Trans. G. Burchell. Pallgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (2012) *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (2016) *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the College de*

- France 1979-1980. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Giannopoulou, Z. (2010) "Derrida's Khôra, or Unnaming the Timaeon Receptacle," in *One Book, The Whole Universe: Plato's Timaeus Today*, in R. D. Mohr and B. M. Sattler (eds.), 165-178. Parmenides Publishing.
- Gill, M. L. (2009) "Matter and Flux in Plato's *Timaeus*." *Phronesis* 32, no. 1 (1987): 34-53.
- Ginsburg, F. and R. Rapp (eds.) (1995) *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*. University of California Press.
- Gordon, J. (2012) *Plato's Erotic World*. Cambridge.
- Gordon, J. (2024) "Sex Difference and what it Means to Be Human in *Timaeus*." In *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Ancient Greek Philosophy*. Eds. S. Brill and C. McKeen, 284-300.
- Grams, L. (2009) "Medical Theory in Plato's *Timaeus*." *Rhizai* 6: 161-192.
- Gregoric, P. (2012) "The First Humans in Plato's *Timaeus*." *Croatian Journal of Philosophy*. 12(35): 183-198.
- Guenther, L. (2012) "Fecundity and Natal Alienation: Rethinking Kinship with Levinas and Orlando Patterson." *Levinas Studies* 7:1-20.
- Guenther, L. (2006) *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction*. Albany.
- Guenther, L. (2008) "Being-From-Others: Reading Heidegger after Cavarero." *Hypatia* 23(1): 99-118.
- Han, I. (2023) *Plato and the Metaphysical Feminine : One Hundred and One Nights*. Oxford University Press.
- Harry, C. and R. Polansky (2016) "Plato on Women's Natural Ability: Revisiting Republic V and *Timaeus* 41e3-44d2 and 86b1-93c2." *Apeiron* 49(3): 261-280.
- Hartman, S. (1997) *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. Oxford University Press.
- Holmes, B. "Bios." (2019) *Political Concepts* 5. <https://www.politicalconcepts.org/bios-brooke-holmes/>
- Hopwood, N., R. Flemming, L. Kassell (eds) (2020) *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hulme, E. (2024) "Plato's Argument for the Inclusion of Women in the Guardian Class: Prospects and Problems." In *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Ancient Greek Philosophy*. Eds. S. Brill and C. McKeen, 165-180, New York.
- Irigaray, L. (1985) *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. G. Gill. Ithaca, NY.
- Jackson, Z. (2020) *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. New York.
- James, J. (forthcoming) *The Captive Maternal: Anti-Fascist Renegades, Runaways and Rebels*. New York.
- Johansen, T. K. (2004) *Plato's Natural Philosophy: A Study of the Timaeus-Critias*.
- Johansen, T. K. (2014) "Why the Cosmos Needs a Craftsman: Plato, *Timaeus* 27d529b1." *Phronesis* 59, no. 4 (2014): 297-320.
- Kalkavage, P. (2001) *Plato's Timaeus. Translation, Glossary, Appendices, and*

- Introductory Essay. Newburyport, MA: Focus Classical Library.
- Kristeva, J. (1984) *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. M. Waller. New York.
- LaChance Adams, S. and C. Lundquist (eds.) (2012) *Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Lape, S. (2010) *Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Layne, D. (2021) "Feminine Power in Proclus's Commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*." *Hypatia* 36, no. 1: 120–144.
- Lemm, V. and M. Vatter (eds.) (2014) *The Government of Life: Foucault, Biopolitics, and Neoliberalism*. New York.
- Lewis, S. (2019) *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against the Family*. London.
- Lewis, S. (2022) *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*. London.
- Loraux, Nicole. (1993) *The Children of Athena*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mbembe, A. (2019) *Necropolitics*. Trans. Steven Corcoran. Duke University Press.
- Miller, D. (2003). The Third Kind in Plato's *Timaeus*. *Hypomnemata*, Bd. 145. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Miller, M. (2003) "The *Timaeus* and the Longer Way." In *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon*. Ed. G. Reydam-Schils, 17–59, Notre Dame.
- Miller, P. A. (2020) "Against Agamben: or Living Your Life, *Zōē* versus *Bios* in the Late Foucault". In *Biotheory: Life and Death under Capitalism*. Eds. J. Di Leo and P. Hitchcock, 23–41, New York: Routledge.
- Miller, P. A. (2021) *Foucault's Seminars on Antiquity: Learning to Speak the Truth*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Mohr, R. and B. Sattler (eds.) (2010) *One Book, the Whole Universe: Plato's Timaeus Today*. Parmenides Publishing.
- Morgan, K. (1998) "Designer History: Plato's Atlantis Story and Fourth-Century Ideology." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*: 118: 101–18.
- Nillson, J. and S. Wallenstein (eds.) (2013) *Foucault, Biopolitics, and Governmentality*. Södertörn.
- O'Byrne, A. 2010. *Natality and Finitude*. Bloomington IN.
- Ojakangas, M. (2022) "Plato and the Biopolitical Purge for the City State." In *Biopolitics and Ancient Thought*. Eds. J. Backman and A. Cimino, 38–58, Oxford.
- Patterson, O. (2018) *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study with a New Preface*. Harvard.
- Reydam-Schils, G. (ed.) (2003) *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon*. Notre Dame.
- Rosivach, V. (1987) "Autochthony and the Athenians." *The Classical Quarterly* 37 (2): 294–306.
- Russell, C. (2018) *The Assisted Reproduction of Race*. Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press.
- Salles, R. (ed.) (2023) *Cosmology and Biology in Ancient Philosophy*. Cambridge.
- Sallis, J. (1999) *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato's Timaeus*. Bloomington.

- Sayer, K. (2003) "The Multilayered Incoherence of Timaeus' Receptacle." in *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon*. Ed. G. J. Reydam-Schils, 60-79, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Sealey, K. (2024) "Living Plots in the Stone-time of Necropolitics." *Critical Philosophy of Race* 12(1): 5-23.
- Sharpe, C. (2016) *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press.
- Söderbäck, F. (2018) "Nativity or Birth? Arendt and Cavarero on the Human Condition of Being Born." *Hypatia* 33(2): 273-288.
- Söderbäck, F. (2014) "Introduction: Why Birth?" *philoSOPHIA* 4(1):1-11.
- Spillers, H. (1987) "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17:2: 65-81.
- Stone, A. (2019) *Being Born: Birth and Philosophy*. Oxford.
- Taran, L. (1971) "The Creation Myth in Plato's *Timaeus*." In *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*. Eds. J. P. Anton, G. L. Kustas, and A. Preus, 1-372, SUNY.
- Tarrant, H. (2017) *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*. Translated and with Introduction and Notes. Volume VI. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [E-book]
- Taylor, A. E. (1928) *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*. Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon; Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, C. (Cussins) (2005) *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Tuana, N (ed.) (1994) *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*. State College, PA.
- Vatter, M. (2006) "Nativity and Biopolitics in Hannah Arendt." *Revista de Ciencia Politica* 26, no. 2: 137-59.
- Vlassopoulos, K. (2021) *Historicising ancient slavery*. Edinburgh.
- Weheliye, A. (2014) *Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke University Press.
- Ziarek, E. (2008) "Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107(1): 89-105.

NOTES

- 1 Cavarero (2014) 15.
- 2 Arendt (1958).
- 3 For a recent survey with examples of this approach, see the sources collected in Hopwood, Flemming, and Kassell (2018). Pas dans la biblio
- 4 Recently, this vein of thinking has been examined through the lens of biopolitics, see, e.g., Ojakangas (2022).

- 5 Many of the forms of surrogacy and familial reorganization for which theorist Sophie Lewis, for instance, calls are already under consideration in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*; see Lewis (2019) and (2022).
- 6 On the racializing dimensions of this debate, see Lape (2010). On the connection between the noble lie and the *Timaeus vis-à-vis* identity and myth-telling, see Morgan (1998)
- 7 For further commentary on this image see Brill (2013).
- 8 Agamben (1998) See critical discussion of this distinction in Dubreuil (2006), Finlayson (2010), Holmes (2019), Miller (2020). My own contribution is to more precisely locate ζωή in Aristotle's thought not as bare life, but rather as an object of desire, see Brill (2020a).
- 9 E.g. Diprose and Ziarek (2018), Cavarero (2014), and Vatter (2006).
- 10 Cavarero (2014). See also Söderbäck (2018) and Guenther (2006) (2008) and (2012).
- 11 See Arendt (1958) 8 and discussion in Cavarero (2014) and Söderbäck (2018).
- 12 Cavarero's engagement with Miguel Vatter in this piece is instructive. For while Vatter will maintain that Arendt's efforts to avoid biologism compel her to make of natality a biopolitical concept, one that, "counters the 'thanatopolitical' concept of bare life" (Vatter 2006 145 cited in C 16), Cavarero contends this thesis is "too daring," and that the Arendtian concept of politics that natality is developed to support, "seems to mobilize a complex theoretical structure that the biological lexicon fails to contain" (16-17).
- 13 See the discussion and bibliographies compiled in Ginsburg and Rapp (1995), LaChance Adams and Lundquist (2012), and Söderbäck (2014) as well as recent studies of the intersection of assisted reproduction technology and biomedical racism in Thompson (2005) and Russell (2018). I am grateful to both of the anonymous reviewers for the journal for posing questions about the relationship between alienated natality, the ideological dimension of origin stories, and what a less alienated approach to birth might look like. Their specific questions go beyond what could be accomplished in this article, but I plan to address this issue in greater detail in current work on the racializing dimension of Plato's eschatological imagery, and on literary depictions of birth in Greek antiquity.

14 E.g. Spillers (1987), Hartman (1997), Weheliye (2014), Mbembe (2019), Ziarek (2008), Deutscher (2017), Jackson (2020).

15 Patterson (2018). Patterson's formulation of natal alienation is not without its critics, particularly among those scholars interested in emphasizing the many and varied forms of community-making among slave populations. See, e.g., Vlassopoulos (2021), Bathrellou and Vlassopoulos (2022), Bodel and Scheidel (2016), etc. See also the important engagement with and complications to natal alienation in recent work in Black feminist thought, e.g., Hartman (2016), Sharpe (2016), James (forthcoming), Sealey (2024). On necroresistance, see Bargu (2014).

16 We can chart this shift in the lectures from the Collège de France delivered from 1975 to 1980, see Foucault (2003), (2009), (2012), and (2016); for discussion, see the scholarship collected in Nilsson and Wallenstein (2013), and Lemm and Vatter (2014).

17 For Aristotle, the term spans both zoological and ethico-political registers, and implicates the τόπος not only of water dwellers and land dwellers, but polis dwellers as well. In these texts, when we know an animal's βίος, we know how its vital activities are conducted in a particular place and through a particular time (the time of their lives, their 'life cycle'), and thus how they use their perceptual capacities to secure sustenance, manage successful reproduction and care for their young, and, in the case of the animal with deliberation, logos, and choice, choose a life oriented around an end. In the case of plants, it indicates their rootedness in a particular τόπος, and the use of their anarchic vital principle to secure their longevity without having to change location. βίος thus locates vital activities in time and place, it signifies the spatial and temporal specificity of one's living, one's ζῆν, and gives consistency to one's status as a ζῶν, as a living being. Hence the transition in *Politics* 1 from the kinds of human βίοι demarcated by sustenance attainment (the nomad, the pirate, the farmer, etc.) to the consideration of the best bios in Books 7 and 8.

18 For masterful treatment of the theme of return in the Platonic dialogues, See Gordon (2012).

19 Miller (2021) 81.

20 Arendt (1958) 247.

21 Cavarero (2014) 17.

22 The range of critical commentary on this passage is vast, see, for example the sources collected in Tuana (1994) and Bar On (1993); for a recent summary and bibliography in Hulme (2024).

23 For sources on the radical contingency of birth, see Stone (2019), esp. Ch. 4, and the extensive bibliography she provides. Critical engagement with the erasure of ‘maternal’ labor is necessary but not sufficient for developing an unalienated stance toward the human natal condition. The danger of essentializing the maternal and reducing reproductive care to a biological phenomenon lies in part in its blindness to the fact that the ‘maternal’ and the ‘natal’ are not coextensive. All are born; not all give birth, and not all who give birth are women.

24 O’Byrne (2010).

25 See especially the discussion in Bianchi (2014) and Gordon (2024), as well as in Gregoric (2012), Harry and Polansky (2016) and Layne (2021), and in the commentaries on the *Timaeus* provided by Broadie (2014), Johansen (2004), Mohr and Sattler (2010), Cornford (1937) and Taylor (1928) as well as the chapters on the *Timaeus* in Salles (2023).

26 On the demiurge’s dual roles of father and poet, see Boys-Stones (2021) and Johanson (2014). As an example of the range of significant philosophical engagement with the Platonic χῶρα, see Kristeva (1984), Irigaray (1985), Butler (1993), Derrida (1997), Sallis (1999), Sayer (2003), Giannopoulou (2010), Faraone (2011), Bianchi (2014), and Han (2023).

27 See, for instance the eschatological myths of the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Gorgias*, and *Laws*. The trope of metempsychosis as expiation for past deeds is connected to the larger relationship between embodiment and signification, and that would lead his Socrates to conjoin ζῶον (living being) and λόγος (speech) as he does in the *Phaedrus*, see discussion in Brill (2020b).

28 See e.g. Rosivach (1987), Loraux (1993), Forsdyke (2012).

29 I am indebted to Jill Gordon’s extensive treatment of the themes of eros and loss in the *Timaeus* and elsewhere in the Platonic corpus, see Gordon (2012) and Gordon (2024). For further discussion of the character of embodiment in the *Timaeus*, see Taran (1971), Finkelberg (1996), D. Miller (2003), Gill (2009), Grams (2009), Brill (2015), and Fletcher (2016).

30 Kalkavage (2001).

31 The verb for ‘assigning’ here, a form of νέμειν, is connected to the apportionment in animal sacrifice and the glades in which animals were pastured

and fed, a marking of vital and divine spaces, and is, via a shared PIE root, associated with the German verb *nehmen*, which will feature prominently in Martin Heidegger's thinking about the animal and its 'poverty' in world. See discussion in Brill (forthcoming).

32 From μείρομαι: to receive one's portion, one's due; obtain one's place; and in passive form: it is allotted, decreed by fate (see also *Rep.*566a and *Phaedrus* 255b).

33 Near the end of the dialogue, Timaeus will recommend imitation of the shaking movement of χώρα to ward off disease (88d6-e6).

34 See, e.g., Guenter (2006), O'Byrne (2010), Söderbäck (2018), Stone (2019).

RÉSUMÉ

English

This paper explores the language of birth in Plato's dialogues via the conceptual framework of natality, with a focus on Plato's interest in the question: to what are humans committed on the basis of their status as born? I argue that natality provides a powerful conceptual tool for understanding Plato's ethical theorizing, as vividly demonstrated in the instructions to the about-to-be-born provided in a passage from the *Timaeus* (41d4-42e4), and conclude with some broader considerations about the relationship between alienated mortality (the denial of the unavoidability of death), alienated natality (the denial of the contingency of birth), and the potentially liberatory aspects of untethering birth-giving and identity.

INDEX

Keywords

Plato, birth, natality, Arendt, Foucault, Republic, Timaeus

AUTEUR

Sara Brill