



Moral responsibility in Plato's philosophy. Commentary on "Timaeus" 86D-87B

Responsabilidad moral en la filosofía de Platón. Comentario sobre "Timeo" 86D-87B

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INFORMACIÓN DEL ARTÍCULO	ABSTRACT/RESUMEN
Recibido el: 7/4/2025 Aceptado el: 31/8/2025 Keywords: Human agency, determinism, education, illness, responsibility Palabras clave: Agencia humana, determinismo, educación, enfermedad, responsabilidad	Abstract: This paper explores various interpretations of moral responsibility in Plato's <i>Timaeus</i>, addressing the puzzle posed by Taylor on the relationship between determinism and human agency. Four main solutions are analyzed: the denial of authorship, the pedagogical approach, the afterlife theory, and the nuanced causality interpretation; it is argued that all these ultimately fall into the same determinism they aim to resolve. Finally, a fifth interpretative approach, the narrative approach, is proposed, suggesting that the determinism in the <i>Timaeus</i> relates to the narrative aspects of the dialogue: <i>Timaeus</i>, as a politician, discusses human nature as something determinable by politics, not in an absolute sense. Resumen: Este artículo explora diversas interpretaciones de la responsabilidad moral en el <i>Timeo</i> de Platón, abordando el rompecabezas planteado por Taylor respecto a la relación entre el determinismo y la agencia humana. Se analizan cuatro soluciones principales: la negación de la autoría, el enfoque pedagógico, la teoría del más allá y la interpretación de causalidad matizada; se argumenta que todas ellas terminan cayendo en el mismo determinismo que intentan resolver. Finalmente, se propone un quinto enfoque interpretativo, el enfoque narrativo, sugiriendo que el determinismo en el <i>Timeo</i> se relaciona con los aspectos narrativos del diálogo: Timeo, en tanto que es un político, discute la naturaleza humana como algo determinable por la política, no en un sentido absoluto.

Introduction: Taylor's puzzle

The reconciliation of the diverse doctrines found in Plato's dialogues has been a central concern of Platonic studies since their earliest days, dating back to the lifetime of the Athenian master himself, as it is pointed out by Aristotle. Among the controversies surrounding the differing views expressed in his works, Taylor (1927) highlights a debate between the *Timaeus* and the rest of the Corpus on the issue of moral responsibility. In his monumental Commentary, He argues that, in the final sections of the *Timaeus*, the eponymous interlocutor presents a theory that challenges and undermines the achievements of Socratic-Platonic philosophy in this domain:

If we read T.'s exposition of it carefully, I think we should be struck by a curious fact. His exposition explains away that very fact of moral responsibility on which Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Timaeus himself, when he is talking ethics and not medicine, are all anxious to insist. The interpretation he proceeds to give of the formula is therefore non-Platonic and non-Socratic. (Taylor, 1927, p. 611)

This is because, in Taylor's view, the genuinely Platonic doctrine of moral accountability is defined by a strong defense of each individual's responsibility in the process of self-formation. Awakening this sense of responsibility, or care for oneself, would appear to be, in his own words, the only intention of the "gadfly of Athens," as recorded in the *Apology* (Plato, 1997):

For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively. (30a-b)

One must not fall into the notion that this is a purely Socratic idea, later abandoned by Plato during the intellectual emancipation evident in his dialogues of maturity and old age. In fact, it could be argued that this very notion is rediscovered in the Myth of Er, which, almost as a culmination of the argument presented in the *Republic*, separates human life from divine interests, rendering the human being responsible for their own destiny:

A demon will not choose you, but you will choose a demon. Let the one who is drawn first by lot select a way of life, to which he will necessarily be bound. As for

excellence, it belongs to no one, but each will have a greater or lesser share of it depending on whether they honor or despise it. The responsibility lies with the one who chooses; God is free from blame. (Plato, 1968, 617e)

However, it is true that the *Timaeus* presents a radically opposed perspective on this very matter. In the final sections of the cosmological dialogue, when the discussion turns to the maladies of the soul—which are nothing other than what Aristotle would later call vices—the principal interlocutor asserts that all evil afflicting the human soul does not stem from any particular activity or conduct of the individual. Instead, it arises from an asymmetry between soul and body, i.e., biological determinism, or a deficiency in the educational process, i.e., social and educational determinism:

No one is wilfully bad. A man becomes bad, rather, as a result of one or another corrupt condition of his body and an uneducated upbringing [...] that is how all of us who are bad come to be that way—the products of two causes both entirely beyond our control. It is the begetters far more than the begotten, and the nurturers far more than the nurtured, that bear the blame for all this. (Plato, 2000, 86d-87b)

In this way, Taylor constructs a puzzle: the challenge of reconciling the Socratic-Platonic notion of responsibility—characterized by attributing to humans the responsibility for their destiny and their active participation in shaping their moral character—with the Timaeian notion, which absolves humans of such responsibility and situates morality within the domains of biology and education. From my perspective, the central issue of this puzzle lies in the differing roles that both theories assign to the individual in self-formation. The Socratic view of responsibility, despite adhering to the typically intellectualist premise that no one intentionally does evil, nonetheless seems to encourage the individual to take charge of their own education. The Timaeian view, by contrast, appears to succumb—under the same premise—to the idea that an individual's life is entirely conditioned by the nature of their body or the city responsible for providing their education. Thus, in the first of these theories, the weight of morality ultimately rests on the individual, whereas in the second, it shifts to external causes, such as nature and politics. To address this issue, the proposals of various scholars will be evaluated, and, ultimately, a suggested solution will be presented.

The attempts of solution (and its problems)

In response to the puzzle, he himself poses, Taylor naturally proposes a solution, which we shall call the "denial of authorship approach." In his view, the contradiction between the *Timaeus* and the rest of the *Corpus* is not doctrinally problematic, as it belongs to *Timaeus*, not to Plato. Thus, the contradiction between the various dialogues would be caused by contemporary academia, which erroneously attributes the words of Plato's characters to the philosopher himself. However, this attempt to preserve doctrinal harmony among the Platonic texts is, in my view, a trap—a supposed harmony that, in reality, rests on the denial of a Platonic doctrine. This is because, if one accepts this interpretative principle and applies it consistently to the *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and other dialogues where Socrates is not the main interlocutor—even to those where he is—we would be forced to conclude that we lack a single definitive opinion from Plato. This would dissolve the *Corpus* into a mere doxographical collection and render the study of Platonic philosophy meaningless. Consequently, in attempting to safeguard the unity of Platonic doctrine, this approach ultimately dissolves it into a collection of disparate opinions.

That said, pointing out that the consequences of a particular interpretative approach are undesirable does not, in itself, constitute a solid argument against it. It could well be the case that Plato merely collected the opinions of the philosophical elite of his time, that the dialogues were nothing more than a portrayal of the intellectual landscape of his era, and that, ultimately, there is no such thing as a Platonic doctrine. Certainly, his texts provide no explicit evidence to the contrary. Nevertheless, in my view, there are various pieces of evidence that demonstrate that the *Timaeus* contains what could be described as genuinely Platonic philosophy. This would make it illegitimate to simply attribute the ideas presented in the dialogue to the statesman *Timaeus* alone.

The first of these arguments is found in the text of the *Timaeus* itself, more specifically in [...]. During the exposition of the myth concerning the genesis of the universe, *Timaeus* states that the demiurge creates the world by observing the Forms and using them as a model. In my view, this doctrine is clearly related to what is presented in the *Republic* and, as Hill (2016) points out, also to the *Phaedrus*. Therefore, even if we cannot take *Timaeus'* words as those of Plato himself, we can assume they are imbued

with a strong dose of Platonism. It could naturally be argued that it was perhaps Socrates himself who, in the conversation from the previous day recounted at the beginning of the dialogue (17a–19a), explained the Theory of Forms to *Timaeus*. Since this section recalls the content of the *Republic*, it suggests a connection between this dialogue and the *Timaeus*, and it could be supposed, therefore, that *Timaeus* might have learned about Platonic metaphysics through this means. However, the truth is that when the previous conversation is recalled—which is undoubtedly linked to the *Republic*—it only refers to its political content, without mentioning the Forms or any other concept specific to Platonic metaphysics. Thus, while we know that *Timaeus* is well-versed in the Forms, we do not know when he became familiar with this doctrine. For this reason, it is plausible, in my opinion, to assume that a philosopher who so masterfully employs the concept of *eidos* is not a statesman unknown to historical tradition, but Plato himself.

The second argument against this interpretation is found in the immediate reception of the *Timaeus*, that is, in the philosophy of Aristotle. The Stagirite was directly familiar with the text and even cites it on multiple occasions throughout his work, yet at no point does he question the attribution of its ideas to his teacher, Plato. Significantly, in *Physics*, IV, 2, when reflecting on the concept of *tópos* (place), he refers to the *Timaeus*, stating the following: Even so, one would have to ask Plato —if it is necessary to make a digression— why forms and numbers are not in a place, considering that place is participatory, whether it be that the participatory is the great and the small, or matter, as he has written in the *Timaeus*. (Plato, 2000, 209b 33-35)

Beyond the strictly philosophical content of the passage, what is relevant for our work lies in the fact that, in Aristotle's view, Plato takes ownership of the doctrines presented in this dialogue. Similarly, in *On Generation and Corruption*, Aristotle states that Plato 'establishes,' 'said,' and 'analyzes' various theories from the *Timaeus*. Considering the limited testimonies that have reached us regarding the functioning of the Academy and the relationship between disciple and teacher, it is difficult to think that, if the doctrines of the *Timaeus* did not actually belong to Plato, Aristotle would have expressed himself in this way, attributing to the master doctrines that were not his own. Therefore, I believe it is reasonable to accept Aristotle's testimony in this case and conclude that the doctrines presented in the *Timaeus* do not belong to an unknown Greek statesman but are indeed

a display of genuinely Platonic philosophy. As a result, Taylor's attempt at reconciliation is ruled out, and we must therefore continue questioning the reconciliation between the various Platonic dialogues.

In this regard, it is interesting to bring up Sedley's (2019) article, in which he argues in favour of the thesis that the *Timaeus* is truly a vehicle for the most strictly Platonic ideas, despite the apparent contradictions that may arise. In this way, we could affirm that we are aligned with Sedley, insofar as we also consider that the *Timaeus* contains the essence of Platonic philosophy.

Some scholars have attempted to overcome this contradiction through what we will call the pedagogical approach, given that this interpretation emphasizes the role of education in the moral development of man, to the point of, in my view, falling into a form of pedagogical determinism, where a man's morality depends entirely on his education; broadly speaking, this interpretative approach is characterized by the assumption that moral evil originates from the pre-demiurgic material substratum and that it is possible to overcome it through education. Among the scholars who could be placed within this perspective is Gill (2000), who acknowledges the puzzle hidden in the text at hand and seeks to solve it by relating the passage to other key points in the Corpus. In his view, the description of the soul's diseases as a consequence of certain physical defects complements the Socratic-Platonic maxim that no one does evil voluntarily, but rather that evil is always linked to a certain kind of ignorance. In the case of the *Timaeus*, what Plato would be attempting to show is that ignorance regarding the functioning of the body is the foundation of the soul's evils, insofar as it prevents proper care of the body. Therefore, it is not that human beings are determined by their bodies, but rather that, by being unaware of how the body should be treated, they lose control and become the source of various diseases.

This interpretation, although it seems to resolve the problem of determinism, can be criticized when considering the literal meaning of the text in question. Gill, for his part, claims that ignorance is the cause of neglecting the body, which leads to the soul's diseases; however, in the *Timaeus*, it is stated that ignorance is a consequence—that is, something that follows this loss of control.

Therefore, it is true that Gill's interpretation harmonizes the various dialogues, but in my view, it does so at the expense of the literal meaning of the *Timaeus* text—or, in other words, it projects the doctrine of other dialogues onto the text at hand. In the *Timaeus*, ignorance is the result of a bodily disorder, not its origin.

Within this same pedagogical approach, we find Pears (2015), who argues that the contradiction between the cosmological determinism of the *Timaeus* and the phenomenon of human freedom can be overcome by referring to the notion of "progress." In this way, although human beings are in some way conditioned by the material substratum from which they are composed, they can progressively rise above this state through education—provided that this education consists of aligning the various parts of the soul with the harmony of the cosmic revolutions established by the demiurge. However, Pears himself, in the conclusion of his article, acknowledges the need to further explore this interpretative line, as it does not fully resolve the issue.

This position is close to that of Campbell (2020), who believes that a careful reading of the text reveals that the origin of human moral evil lies solely—this nuance of singularity in the origin is the main point Campbell emphasizes—in the human bodily condition, which, nevertheless, can be corrected through pedagogy. Steel (2001) also attributes the origin of evil to a physical issue related to the pre-demiurgic state of matter. However, instead of locating it in the body, he identifies the passions as the cause of disease, and moral development would involve educating them.

In this way, these five authors indicate that moral evil originates in matter, the body, ignorance, or the passions—all of which are derived from the pre-demiurgic state of matter, which the god cannot shape entirely at will. As a consequence, human beings are imperfect. For the matter at hand, all these concepts are analogous, as the four proposals locate the origin of the soul's ailments in physical issues and their remedy in pedagogical methods, which, moreover, are presented within the text itself. Therefore, not only would there be no biological determinism in the *Timaeus*, but the text itself would also provide the keys to overcoming it by emphasizing the importance of education in human development.

However, this approach still does not resolve the problem raised by Taylor; in my view, it merely avoids it. Education, as these authors conceive it, is necessarily an external

stimulus, separate from the moral subject itself, insofar as humans are conditioned by their pre-demiurgic matter. In this way, the fact that a person can emerge from their state of soul sickness through the education provided by teachers or elders does not imply that they become responsible for their actions. Rather, it extends the scope of determinism to the realm of education. Thus, the pedagogical approach assumes that we are biologically determined, though not absolutely so. Through education—which does not originate from the individual (since they are biologically prone to disease) but is instead provided by the city—it becomes possible to prevent these ailments and improve individuals' moral character.

To fully resolve the puzzle posed by Taylor and align the doctrine of moral responsibility in the *Timaeus* with the rest of Plato's dialogues, it would be necessary for the pedagogical approach to demonstrate how a human being—in their material and bodily condition, which is, in this view, imperfect and prone to ignorance—is capable of actively participating in their own education. Otherwise, we must admit that education is only possible within the framework of political life and that the moral character of individuals is merely the product of their educators' influence. Consequently, it would not be possible to speak of moral responsibility in the strong sense. Instead, the pedagogical approach would lead us into a form of pedagogical determinism, where responsibility rests not with the student but with the teacher, as is indeed suggested in the text (Plato, 2000, 87b). Therefore, insofar as the pedagogical approach fails to harmonize the notion of responsibility in the *Timaeus* with that of other dialogues—and, on the contrary, deepens the pedagogical determinism that seems to emerge from the text, which contradicts the rest of the Corpus according to Taylor—it must be ruled out as a solution to his puzzle.

To resolve the puzzle, one could turn to the interesting article by Kamtekar (2016), in which she explores what could be considered a third way for our problem, which we will call the afterlife approach. This approach emphasizes moral responsibility through the concepts of reincarnation and punishment presented in the *Timaeus*, thereby linking this dialogue with the *Laws*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, and, of course, the *Republic*. In this way, the author highlights the fact that reincarnation, which is described in the *Timaeus* as a punishment, would form part of a process of moral progress orchestrated by the gods to establish the most perfect possible harmony in the cosmos. In the same vein, we find the

article by Stalley (1996), which emphasizes the role of punishment in Platonic cosmology—specifically, the role of punishment and moral development in the demiurge's plan for cosmic harmony.

However, it is important to note a significant issue that arises when considering this approach. At the moment of reincarnation, the human being is judged for their conduct on Earth, meaning that the afterlife is conditioned by their earthly life. Yet, it should not be forgotten that this is also conditioned by the biological determinism described by the *Timaeus* itself. Ultimately, situating the moment of moral responsibility in the judgment after death, without first addressing the problem of biological determinism, far from achieving the supposed moral progress that Kamtekar and Stalley point to, could lead to the opposite: from a bad bodily condition comes bad conduct, and from bad conduct comes a bad reincarnation, which consists of a bad bodily condition, and so on, resulting in a clear moral degeneration in which the individual cannot take responsibility. Thus, this approach does not solve the problem of determinism; rather, it exacerbates it, now involving divine action in the moral development of the human being. As we have pointed out, this had been overcome by Plato in the *Republic*.

Furthermore, placing human moral progress within the demiurge's plan, rather than overcoming the determinism we are facing in this article, ultimately exacerbates it, since this moral progress would be the result of divine will rather than human agency. Consequently, Kamtekar suggests that, in her interpretation, the gods and humanity share responsibility for human beings. For these reasons, we believe that the afterlife approach is not suitable for overcoming the determinism pointed out by Taylor.

The last approach we will consider in this article is that of Jorgenson (2021), who attempts to overcome the problem of determinism in the *Timaeus* by suggesting that the theory of causality in the text should not be understood in a strong sense but rather requires nuance. For this reason, we will refer to this interpretation as the nuanced approach. Jorgenson addresses the problem of responsibility in dialogue with Taylor and Gill and points out that both authors err in assuming that the notion of causality in the *Timaeus* is linked to moral responsibility. Due to this mistake, they assume that, when *Timaeus* says that parents are the cause of their children's evil, it implies that they are therefore responsible for it. Jorgenson, on the other hand, argues that this idea of

causality is morally neutral, and therefore, while parents are the cause of the evil in their children, this should not be understood in a deterministic framework. Rather, it is simply pointing out the origin of the evil, assigning the children the task of overcoming the limitations imposed by their parents in conceiving them. It is not merely that we cannot be blamed for our badness, but that the notion of blame itself makes little sense, at least at this lofty level of analysis. This point seems to be missed by most commentators, who take *Timaeus* to say that blame is transferred from the child to the parents. In fact, there is a subtle, but significant difference in meaning between the words *Timaeus* uses in the two cases. Initially, he says that no one does wrong willingly and hence that those who are bad are “wrongly blamed” (*ouk orthōs oneidizeitai*, 86d7) for their actions. But when he attributes responsibility to parents and educators, he uses not *oneidizeitai*, but *aitiateon*. The latter term can mean “to blame” someone for a fault, which is how it is generally interpreted here, but it also has the more neutral sense of “identify as the cause.” (p. 270)

This interpretation, while quite interesting, reveals at least two weaknesses. The first is that the philological exercise proposed by Jorgenson rests on a single use of *aitiaeton* detached from its moral sense. In fact, the author bases his interpretation on a passage from the *Republic* (397c2-7), where Socrates distinguishes between being responsible (*aitios*) and being identified as the cause (*aitiaeton*). However, the fact that this is the only example the author presents in his study compels the reader to remain cautious, awaiting further philological studies to shed more light on the matter. Certainly, Jorgenson's observation is of great interest; however, the evidence in its favor is scant.

The second issue is that alternative lines of interpretation regarding the meaning of *aitiaeton* can be traced. In fact, the term is a verbal adjective derived from *aitiaomai*, meaning “to accuse,” a usage found in the *Republic* (562d), which fits perfectly with the sense of the *Timaeus* passage. Therefore, while Jorgenson's interpretation is genuinely intriguing, it warrants a deeper study of Plato's terminological usages, which, for now, has not been fully resolved.

In summary, in this section we have evaluated four possible solutions to Taylor's puzzle about moral responsibility in Plato's philosophy. The first, the route of denying authorship, proved insufficient when considering various ancient testimonies about the

Timaeus, among other arguments presented. The second, the pedagogical approach, was rejected on the grounds that it failed to escape determinism, instead shifting it to the realm of education, which does not resolve our puzzle. The third, the afterlife approach, was found to be contrary to moral progress and additionally involves the gods in the fate of humans, leading to theological determinism. Finally, the fourth and last, the nuanced approach, while interesting, was considered problematic due to the lack of philological evidence in its favour, on one hand, and the evidence against it, on the other.

Conclusion: Cornford's solution (and a contribution to it)

Cornford (1937/1997), who outright rejects Taylor's deterministic interpretation, argues that the passage in question should be understood in light of the narrative elements that constitute the *Timaeus*. For this reason, we will refer to this interpretative approach as the narrative approach. In Cornford's view, it is crucial to consider, first, that this is a dialogue on natural philosophy, and its exploration of ethical issues should be interpreted from this perspective. Second, it must not be overlooked that *Timaeus*, the character, is a statesman and an expert in both politics and astronomy. Thus, Cornford's interpretation emphasizes that what *Timaeus* says should not be understood as an absolute assertion of the determined nature of human beings. Instead, it merely establishes the framework of natural determination that a politician must consider when performing their duties. In other words, *Timaeus* is simply articulating what a statesman needs to understand about natural philosophy for the proper execution of their political responsibilities.

In his view, considering the doctrine of the *Timaeus* in this way not only resolves the alleged dissonance between this dialogue and the rest but also makes it legitimate to establish a concordance with what is presented in the Laws. Indeed, in this dialogue, the description of disease only makes sense in relation to the subsequent explanation of its methods of prevention:

The doctrine of the Laws is in harmony with our passage. The evils here described are to be pitied because their origin lies in causes at work when a man cannot have begun to exercise rational control, and they are remediable if taken in hand before he comes 'totally and obstinately wicked'. This is the answer to the criticism that *Timaeus* leaves out of account 'real wickedness' and 'conceive of no wickedness that is more than weakness'. The passage is not concerned with the ingrained and

irremediable vice which calls for punishment or extermination. A physical treatise may confine itself to hygiene. All that is needed is the mild preventive remedies described in the next paragraphs. (p. 349)

In this context, if we consider that *Timaeus* is not describing human nature as something fixed and predetermined, but rather as something shaped and influenced by the political system in place, it opens up an interesting perspective on the role of society in human development. This view suggests that individuals are not simply bound by innate characteristics but are instead moulded by the values, structures, and norms of the political environment they inhabit. Such an interpretation emphasizes the adaptability and malleability of human beings, making political and social frameworks key factors in defining human behaviour and ethical principles. Therefore, *Timaeus* seems to present a dynamic vision of humanity, one that evolves and responds to the conditions imposed by governance and social organization.

At this point, it is worth connecting this dialogue with *The Republic*. For *Timaeus*, the root of ignorance lies in a misalignment between the body and the mind. One possible measure to prevent this type of ailment of the soul might be the birth control policy proposed in *The Republic*, as it aims to ensure that great minds are not housed in flawed or inadequate bodies. By regulating reproduction and fostering the ideal combination of physical and intellectual traits, Plato suggests that society could maintain a harmonious balance, minimizing the potential for discord between the body and the mind, and thus promoting the cultivation of wisdom and virtue.

In this article, we have attempted to show a possible tension between the *Timaeus* and the rest of Plato's works concerning moral responsibility, inasmuch as the *Timaeus* seems to endorse a determinism that would contradict the firm resolution found in other dialogues, according to which the moral agent is responsible for their actions. To address this issue, we have referred to Taylor's commentary on the *Timaeus*, and, to explore a potential answer, Cornford's commentary. In this way, we have tried to show how interpreting the words of the characters in Plato's dialogues through their narrative elements—specifically, how the author characterizes them, the role they occupy in the city, or the profession they pursue—can be insightful. Thus, *Timaeus* would not be speaking about human nature as determined, but as determinable by political institutions,

interpreted in this manner due to the statesman role Plato assigns to the character. In conclusion, the *Timaeus* would not be in contradiction with the *Republic*, as Taylor suggests, but rather in harmony with it; more specifically, the political-pedagogical project of the *Republic*, which includes population control and regulation of reproductive relationships, would be completed in the medical philosophy of the *Timaeus*: failing to adhere to the legislation of the *Republic* would lead to the soul's diseases described in the *Timaeus*. Therefore, it presents itself as a possible link between the two dialogues.

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