DISCUSSION NOTE

Immortality in the Timaeus

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In the *Timaeus*, Plato distinguishes between the immortal element in the human soul – the rational part, created by the Demiurge – and the mortal element – the spirited and appetitive parts, created by the heavenly gods\(^1\). It has traditionally been supposed that in calling the lower parts of soul mortal, Plato means that they will in fact perish; hence in its most perfect state, when it ascends to heaven to live with the stars, the soul will be purely rational. However, this view has recently been challenged by James V. Robinson\(^2\), who argues that the lower parts of soul may be seen as everlasting, even though not strictly immortal, so that the soul will always be tripartite. My purpose here is to argue in support of the traditional interpretation; the lower parts of soul are mortal in practice, not only in principle, and will in fact perish.

Robinson’s argument falls into two parts. In the first he seeks to establish that Plato’s description of the lower parts of soul as mortal is consistent with their being everlasting; in the second he offers positive reasons for seeing them as everlasting. I will consider the two parts of the argument separately.

I. Robinson’s argument for the view that things which are everlasting may nevertheless be described as mortal\(^3\) is based on the address of the Demiurge to the gods at 41a-b. The Demiurge says that ‘whatever has been bound may be loosed’ (41b1), and so the gods, having been generated, are ‘not altogether immortal or indissoluble’ (41b2-3); but things which are made by the Demiurge cannot be destroyed without his consent; therefore the gods will not in fact be destroyed, but are preserved in being by the will of their creator. This passage certainly shows that some beings are everlasting without being immortal in the fullest sense. However, I will argue that the lower parts of soul cannot be assigned to this category. In calling them mortal, Plato means to contrast them, not only with things which are immortal in the fullest sense, but also with things which are everlasting through the divine will.

We should first note that the Demiurge does not say that the gods are not

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\(^1\) Tim. 41c-d, 69c, 73c-e, 90b-c, etc.

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immortal, but only that they are not altogether (τὸ πάμπρων) immortal. Immortality was closely linked with divinity in Greek thought, and Plato maintains this connection. He clearly does think of the gods as in some sense immortal; in this passage they are contrasted with mortal living creatures, and they are explicitly described as immortal living creatures at 69c2-5.

Hence this passage should not be read as saying that some things which are mortal are nevertheless everlasting, but rather that some things which are not fully immortal have a secondary and derived immortality. These are contrasted with things which are immortal in the fullest sense, but also with things which are simply mortal. The gods are mortal in principle, in that since they are generated, it is conceivable that they will perish; but they are immortal in practice, since they cannot be destroyed except by the will of their creator, and he would never consent to their destruction.

Moreover, it seems that this secondary and derived immortality is the only kind of immortality found within the created world. This follows from what the Demiurge says at 41a-b; he affirms that ‘whatever has been bound may be loosed’; in the following lines, where this principle is applied to the gods, it is taken to imply that whatever has been generated may be destroyed. It is significant that the point is made, both here and elsewhere, in terms of binding and dissolution; this suggests that the underlying idea is that whatever has been generated is composite, and can in principle be resolved into its component parts. It is plausible that Plato should think of generation and destruction in terms of composition and dissolution, since in the Timaeus he makes no use of the concept of creation ex nihilo.

While this doctrine, that whatever is generated may in principle be destroyed, is most clearly stated in connection with the gods, it has a wider application. At 32c2-4 and 38b6-7 it is applied to the world as a whole. Most significantly, it also applies to the ‘divine’ rational element in the human soul. This follows from Plato’s statements about the origin and nature of the soul; it is also supported by direct evidence.

In the Timaeus, the soul is clearly presented as generated. At 34b-36d the creation of the World Soul by the Demiurge is described; at 41d the rational human soul is created in the same way. It is disputed whether these references

3 Robinson (1990) 103-4.
4 It seems reasonable to read τὸ πάμπρων as governing both ὄθιμυστολ and ὀλυτεον.
5 There is a parallel to this in what Plato says about eternity. At 37d3-4, the world, because it is generated, cannot altogether (παντελῶς) share in eternity; but this does not mean that generated things cannot be eternal in any sense; the term is applied at 37d7 to time, a generated feature of the world.
6 Cf. Phaedo 78c ff. where it is argued that the incomposite is indestructible, and Socrates seeks to ground the immortality of the soul on its incomposite nature.
7 32c2-4: ‘so that coming into unity with itself, it should become indestructible by any other except him who bound it together.’ 38b6-7: ‘time came into being along with the world, so that being generated together they might be dissolved together, if ever any dissolution of them should come to pass.’