

Afterlife and Reincarnation in Plutarch

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Although Plutarch (appr. 45-120 CE), the philosopher-priest from Delphi, is of course considerably later than Philo, he always serves as an interesting pagan-religious dialog-partner in questions addressed in Hellenistic-Jewish and early Christian texts. In this paper, we will look at some passages in his work on afterlife and reincarnation which may give an idea of the religious and philosophical milieu in which Philo's thought on the question is embedded. Stemming from different genres and different phases of Plutarch's oeuvre, the selected examples show a wide range of possible approaches to the question. All of them, however, are taken from Plutarch's *Moralia*, a collection of writings on a variety of topics ranging from animal psychology and the nature of the God of the Jews to the healing of vices, Egyptian religious lore, and the face in the moon.

The separation of the soul from the body after death is a given for the Platonist Plutarch. But what comes next? Reincarnation? A blissful life for the good soul, punishment for the wicked? Or not even punishment for the bad, but sheer extinction from existence and memory? Plutarch plays with all these options in different contexts depending on the respective rhetorical goal.

I would first like to discuss Plutarch's *Consolation to his wife* about the death of their beloved little daughter, second his picture of torture for the souls of the wicked as a retribution for their evil deeds in life („The delay of divine punishment“; *De sera numinis vindicta*). On a more scientific, cosmological, and anthropological note we find considerations about the mechanics of death in the treatise on the Face in the Moon (*De facie in orbe lunae*). And finally, *De Iside et Osiride* show, how the god of the dead (Osiris) is in fact the god of real life.

These texts, if placed next to each other, show Plutarch as a versatile writer who shapes his arguments to suit specific contexts: at times with a soteriological goal, at other times in defence of divine justice and power, at times with a more anthropological and even cosmological focus.

1. A Bird Freed from the Cage (*Conslatio ad uxorem*)

The letter of consolation addressed to his wife Timoxena following the premature death of their two year old child is a moving document about the love of a father directed to his daughter. In our context, however, it is more important that his consolation rests on the neo-Pythagorean belief in a fate of the soul beyond physical death. Arguing Plutarch argues against the Epicurean idea (expressed in *ratae sententiae* 2) that there will be nothing harmful after death because the soul (and with its every sensibility) will cease to be.¹ We are dissuaded to believe such ideas, argues Plutarch, “by the teaching of our fathers and by the mystic formulas of the Dionysiac rites, the knowledge of which we who are participants share with each other” (611D).² The Platonist philosopher here makes an argument from religious tradition:³ The mystery rites show that there is indeed a life for the (immortal) soul after death, but also that the soul does not actually belong to the body to which it returns in a series of incarnations out of habituation. The body is in fact like a cage for the soul:

Consider then that the soul, which is imperishable, is affected like a captive bird: if it has long been reared in the body and has become tamed to this life by many activities and long familiarity, it alights again and re-enters the body, and does not leave off or cease from becoming entangled in the passions and fortunes of this world through repeated births. (611D-E).

ὡς οὖν ἄφθαρτον οὖσαν τὴν ψυχὴν διανοοῦ ταὐτὸ ταῖς ἀλισκομέναις ὄρνισι πάσχειν· ἂν μὲν γὰρ πολὺν ἐντραφῆ τῷ σώματι χρόνον καὶ γένηται τῷ βίῳ τούτῳ τιθασὸς ὑπὸ πραγμάτων πολλῶν καὶ μακρᾶς συνηθείας, αὐθις καταίρουσα πάλιν ἐνδύεται καὶ οὐκ ἀνίησιν οὐδὲ λήγει τοῖς ἐνταῦθα συμπλεκόμενῃ πάθεσι καὶ τύχαις διὰ τῶν γενέσεων.

¹ Cf. also Plutarch’s *Non posse suaviter vivere secundum Epicurum* 1103D; 1105A.

² Καὶ μὴν ἂ τῶν ἄλλων ἀκούεις, οἱ πείθουσι πολλοὺς λέγοντες ὡς οὐδὲν οὐδαμῆ τῷ διαλυθέντι κακὸν οὐδὲ λυπηρὸν ἔστιν, οἷδ’ ὅτι κωλύει σε πιστεύειν ὁ πάτριος λόγος καὶ τὰ μυστικὰ σύμβολα τῶν περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον ὀργιασμῶν, ἃ σύνισμεν ἀλλήλοις οἱ κοινωνοῦντες. ὡς οὖν ἄφθαρτον οὖσαν τὴν ψυχὴν διανοοῦ ταὐτὸ ταῖς ἀλισκομέναις ὄρνισι πάσχειν. Translations are from LCL unless otherwise noted. There are also some clearly Neopythagorean traits visible elsewhere in Plutarch’s oeuvre, not least in his leaning towards vegetarianism which is linked to the idea of the rational nature of animals.

³ This fits the opinion expressed elsewhere that religion and cultic ritual serve as a main source of joy in life (*Non posse* 1101E; similarly *De superst.* 169D; *Num.* 8; the entire passage *Non posse* 1100F-1102A).

If, on the other hand, a child dies not long after it has been born, the soul is not yet attached too heavily to the body, before it is freed again:

Whereas the soul that tarries after its capture but a brief space in the body before it is set free by higher powers proceeds to its natural state as though released from a bent position with flexibility and resilience unimpaired. For just as a fire flares up again and quickly recovers, if a person who has extinguished it immediately lights it again, but is harder to rekindle if it remains extinguished for some time, so too those souls fare best whose lot it is, according to the poet

Soon as they may to pass through Hades' gates

before much love of the business of our life here has been engendered in them, and before they have been adapted to the body by becoming softened and fused with it as by reagents" (611F).⁴

This is the reason why there is no period of mourning for deceased children: the souls of the children are awaiting a better life. Plutarch's second argument, thus, is taken from ancestral funerary customs:

It is rather in our ancestral and ancient usages and laws that the truth of these matters is to be seen; for our people do not bring libations to those of their children who die in infancy, nor do they observe in their case any of the other rites that the living are expected to perform for the dead, as such children have no part in earth or earthly things; nor yet do they tarry where the burial is celebrated, at the graves, or at the laying out of the dead, and sit by the bodies. For the laws forbid us to mourn for infants, holding it impiety to mourn for those who have departed to a dispensation and a region too that is better and more divine. [...]

And since this is harder to disbelieve than to believe, let us keep our outward conduct as the laws command, and keep ourselves within yet freer from pollution and pure and more temperate. (612A-B)

Τοῖς δὲ πατρίοις καὶ παλαιοῖς ἔθεσι καὶ νόμοις ἐμφαίνεται μᾶλλον ἢ περὶ τούτων ἀλήθεια. τοῖς γὰρ αὐτῶν νηπίοις ἀποθανοῦσιν οὔτε χοὰς ἐπιφέρουσιν οὔτ' ἄλλα δρῶσι περὶ αὐτὰ οἷ' εἰκὸς ὑπὲρ θανόντων ποιεῖν· οὐ γὰρ μέτεστι γῆς οὐδὲν οὐδὲ τῶν περὶ γῆν αὐτοῖς· οὐδ' αὐτοῦ περὶ ταφὰς καὶ μνήματα καὶ προθέσεις νεκρῶν φιλοχωροῦσι καὶ παρακάθηται τοῖς σώμασιν· οὐ γὰρ ἐῶσιν οἱ νόμοι περὶ τοὺς τηλικούτους, ὡς οὐχ ὅσιον εἰς βελτίονα καὶ θειοτέραν μοῖραν ἅμα καὶ χώραν μεθεστηκότας ἐπεὶ δὲ τὸ ἀπιστεῖν χαλεπώτερόν ἐστιν αὐτοῖς ἢ τὸ πιστεῦναι, τὰ μὲν ἐκτὸς οὕτως ὡς οἱ νόμοι προστάσσουσιν ἔχωμεν, τὰ δ' ἐντὸς ἔτι μᾶλλον ἀμίαντα καὶ καθαρὰ καὶ σώφρονα.

The argument follows from a Platonic dichotomy of soul and body, but Plutarch does not dwell on the negative connotations of the *soma-sema*-idea, but rather on the positive aspect that the soul without the limitations of a body lives a happy life. Reincarnation in this picture is just a consequence of the idea of the immortality of the soul. While here Plutarch only alludes to the idea of a land of the blessed souls⁵, it is introduced more openly in a mythical passage in *De latenter vivendo*.⁶ One might

⁴ Despite several lacunae the gist of the argument remains pretty clear.

⁵ Cf. B. Heininger, *Der "Ort der Frommen". Zur Rezeption eschatologischer Tradition bei Plutarch und im 1. Clemensbrief*, in: *Plutarch: Ist "Lebe im Verborgenen" eine gute Lebensregel (SAPERE 1)*, Darmstadt 2000, 140-161.

⁶ 1130C: † Καίτοι τῆς γε δόξης καὶ τοῦ εἶναι φύσιν εὐσεβῶν

infer from other passages in Plutarch (especially in *De genio Socratis* and *De facie*) that this “better and more divine lot and place” to which the blessed souls are on their way, is in fact on the moon.

It goes without saying that because of the occasion (the death of a little girl), and because of the constraints of the genre of a consolation in general, the punishment of the souls after death is here not even in view.

2. Coloured, Melted and Bent: (Almost) Final Judgement of the Souls in *De sera numinis vindicta*

The situation is completely different in *On the Delay of the Divine Vengeance*. Cast in the form of a Platonic dialogue, the work discusses the afterlife of the soul as part of a defense of divine justice against the attacks of one of the interlocutors, a certain Epicurus. Even though he has already left the conversation, the deep wounds left by his attacks still require treatment.⁷

Why is the divine so slow sometimes to punish the evil deeds of wrongdoers? That is the fundamental question dealt with in the dialogue. Plutarch uses the skeptical argument that we can never know for sure, but have to look for plausible explanations. Under the condition that God is both just and omnipotent, Plutarch presents various such explanations; for example, the tyrant may sometimes function as a medical treatment for a people gone astray (552F-553A⁸) or the passage of time may in fact prolong the fear of imminent punishment (μακρὸς θάνατος; 554C-D) and thus afflict a more painful retribution on the guilty (553 F⁹). Plutarch also plays

χῶρον,

‘τοῖσι λάμπει μένος αἰλίου τὰν ἐνθάδε νύκτα κάτω,
φοινικορόδοις ἐνὶ λειμώνεσσι’ (Pind. fr. 129),
καὶ [τοῖσιν] † ἀκάρπων μὲν ἀνθηρῶν καὶ σκυθίων δένδρων
ἄνθεσι τεθηλὸς ἀναπέπταται πεδίον, καὶ ποταμοὶ τινες
ἄκλυστοι καὶ λεῖοι διαρρέουσι, καὶ διατριβὰς ἔχουσιν ἐν
μνήμασι καὶ λόγοις τῶν γεγονότων καὶ ὄντων παραπέμ-
ποντες αὐτοὺς καὶ συνόντες.

⁷ I have argued elsewhere that this is Plutarch’s way of including Epicurus as a character in his dialogue, even though he has “left” more than three centuries earlier (R. Hirsch-Luipold, *Plutarchs Denken in Bildern. Studien zur literarischen, philosophischen und religiösen Funktion des Bildhaften*, STAC 14, Tübingen 2002, 154-158).

⁸ Cf. Hirsch-Luipold (2002) 247-250.

⁹ Cf. Hirsch-Luipold (2002) 252-256.

with the idea that in some cases the punishment is transferred from ancestors to their offspring (558D-F¹⁰). The idea of a life of the souls after death is needed to deal with this case and with the otherwise unexplainable rest. There must be judgment, on the one hand, for those who have not already paid for their evil deeds during their lifetime, and, on the other hand, a good life and justice for their victims.¹¹ For the wicked, three different forms of “punishment” are envisaged (exercised by three different divine institutions):¹² *Poine* inflicts punishment on the living who can still be cured, *Dike* brings justice to the more problematic cases after death, and *Erinyes* haunts the worst cases and pursues them into utter oblivion (564E-565A).¹³

In one of Plutarch’s famous eschatological myths at the end of the treatise we get a glimpse of the fate of the souls after death. It is the vision of a certain Aridaios¹⁴ who, after falling from a height, lay like dead for three days. During that time, his soul, or rather the intellectual part of his soul, had left his body and travelled the beyond where he got to see different places for the disembodied souls.

The myth depicts visions of the most horrible punishments in the hereafter: the souls of the wicked carry heavy marks like weals, scars and stripes of their vices and misdeeds in in revolting colors that are now scoured in the most painful way (565A-C).

But whoever comes here from the world below unpunished and unpurged, is fastened upon by *Dike*, exposed to view and naked in his soul, having nothing in which to sink out of sight and hide himself and cloak his baseness, but on all sides plainly visible to all in all his shame. In this state she first shows him to his good parents and ancestors—if such they are—as one execrable and unworthy of them, while if they are wicked, he sees them punished and is seen by them; he then undergoes prolonged chastisement, each of his passions being removed with pains and torments that in magnitude and intensity as far transcend those that pass through the flesh as the reality would be more vivid than a dream. “The scars and welts left by the different passions are more

¹⁰ Cf. Hirsch-Luipold (2002) 257-262.

¹¹ If such a survival of the souls is agreed upon, two views remain possible, as is rightly pointed out by Olympichus in 560 A-B: either the souls are altogether imperishable or they survive for a certain time. Cf. Non posse suaviter vivere secundum Epicurum 1107B.

¹² Punishment in the hereafter seems to be thought of as a position of the opponents in *De virt mor* 450a, but the passage is not very specific.

¹³ Cf. *De latenter vivendo* 1130D. *Poine* does not concern us here, because she brings retribution already in this life – in fact the lightest form of punishment. This form of punishment is like a dream compared to the real punishment awaiting those in the hereafter who were bad enough not to be punished by *Poine*.

¹⁴ Surely a play on “Ardaios” who is punished in the myth of Er in Plato *Rep.* 615e-f. (Justin, Clement of Alexandria, and Eusebios actually give the form “Aridaios” when quoting the passage; cf. Brenk, In Mist, 137).

persistent in some, less so in others. "Observe," he (i.e. the relative who guides Aridaïos through the hereafter) said, "in the souls that mixture and variety of colours: one is drab brown, the stain that comes of meanness and greed; another a fiery blood-red, which comes of cruelty and savagery; where you see the blue-grey, some form of incontinence in pleasure has barely been rubbed out; while if spite and envy are present they give out this livid green, as ink is ejected by the squid.

ὅς δ' ἂν ἐκεῖθεν ἀκόλαστος ἐνταῦθα καὶ ἀκάθαρτος ἐξίκηται, τοῦτον ἢ Δίκη διαλαβοῦσα τῆ ψυχῇ καταφανῆ, γυμνόν, (B.) εἰς οὐδὲν ἔχοντα καταδύναι καὶ ἀποκρῦψασθαι καὶ περιστεῖλαι τὴν μοχθηρίαν ἀλλὰ πανταχόθεν καὶ ὑπὸ πάντων καὶ πάντα καθορώμενον ἔδειξε πρῶτον ἀγαθοῖς γονεῦσιν, ἄνπερ ὦσι, καὶ προγόνους αὐτοῦ πρόσπτυστον ὄντα καὶ ἀνάξιον· ἐὰν δὲ φαῦλοι, κολαζομένους ἐπιδῶν ἐκείνους καὶ ὄφθεις δικαιοῦται πολὺν χρόνον ἐξαιρούμενος ἕκαστον τῶν παθῶν ἀλγηδόσι καὶ πόνοις, οἱ τοσοῦτο μεγέθει καὶ σφοδρότητι τοὺς διὰ σαρκὸς ὑπερβάλλουσιν, ὅσον τὸ ὕπαρ ἂν εἶη τοῦ ὀνειράτος ἐναργέστερον. οὐλαὶ δὲ καὶ μώλωπες ἐπὶ τῶν παθῶν ἕκαστου τοῖς μὲν μᾶλλον ἐμμένουσι τοῖς δ' ἦσσαν. ὄρα δ' εἶπε 'τὰ ποικίλα ταῦτα καὶ (C.) παντοδαπὰ χρώματα τῶν ψυχῶν· τὸ μὲν ὄρφνιον καὶ ὀυπαρόν, ἀνελευθερίας ἀλοιφήν καὶ πλεονεξίας, τὸ δ' αἱματωπὸν καὶ διάπυρον, ὠμότητος καὶ πικρίας· ὅπου δὲ τὸ γλαυκινόν ἐστιν, ἐντεῦθεν ἀκρασία τις περὶ ἡδονᾶς ἐκτέτριπται μόλις· κακόνιοι δ' ἐνοῦσα μετὰ φθόνου τοῦτι τὸ ἰώδες καὶ ὑπουλον, ὥσπερ αἰ σηπίαι τὸ μέλαν, ἀφήσιν.

Scouring out the marks of wickedness on the soul until these colours are completely erased and the souls are all light and uniform in colour is a terribly painful process (note the physicality in the way Plutarch talks about the fate of the souls!).

As Aridaïos takes a closer look, he recognizes his own father among those who have to pay the painful price for all their wrongdoings. The executors force him to confess all the crimes he has committed. Frightened, Aridaïos deserts his own father.

Next comes the punishment of those who committed evil deeds, but pretended to be good. Their souls are turned inside out to show their inner ulcers.¹⁵ How seriously are we supposed to take this: flipping non-physical souls inside-out? Plutarch's strategy is to evoke an impossible image to emphasize how invasive this operation is: the innermost parts of the soul are shown and scoured. There is definitely nothing left to scrub clean, even though nothing could have been hidden to begin with. We have already heard that the souls are naked and that they are forced to confess. In any case, it is an extremely physical image of the torture of souls!

Next, the souls are melted like metal in fire and finally thrown into tempering water.

Aridaïos witnesses three lakes:

...one a seething lake of gold, a second, piercing cold, of lead, and a third of rugged iron, with certain daemons in charge, who, like smiths, were using tongs to raise and lower alternately the souls of those whose wickedness was due to insatiable and overreaching avarice. Thus, when the souls had grown red hot in the gold from the blazing heat, the daemons plunged them into the

¹⁵ This passage always reminds me of leeches.

lake of lead; when they had there been chilled and hardened, like hailstones, they were removed to the lake of iron. Here they turned an intense black and were altered in appearance, as their hardness caused them to become chipped and crushed; and after this they were once more taken to the gold, enduring, as he said, the most fearful agonies in the course of each change. (567C-D)

εἶναι δὲ καὶ λίμνας παρ' ἀλλήλας, τὴν μὲν χρυσοῦ περιζέουσιν τὴν δὲ μολίβδου ψυχροτάτην ἄλλην δὲ τραχείαν σιδήρου· καὶ τινὰς ἐφεισθῆναι δαίμονας ὥσπερ οἱ χαλκεῖς ὄργανοις ἀναλαμβάνοντας καὶ καθιέντας ἐν μέρει τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν δι' ἀπληστίαν καὶ πλεονεξίαν πονηρῶν. ἐν μὲν γὰρ τῷ χρυσῷ διαπύρους καὶ διαφανεῖς ὑπὸ τοῦ φλέγεσθαι γενομένας ἐνέβαλλον εἰς τὴν τοῦ μολίβδου βάπτοντες· ἐκπαγείσας δ' αὐτόθι καὶ γενομένας σκληρὰς ὥσπερ αἱ χάλαζαι πάλιν εἰς τὴν τοῦ σιδήρου μεθίστασαν· ἐνταῦθα δὲ μέλαιναί τε δεινῶς ἐγίνοντο καὶ περικλώμεναι διὰ σκληρότητα καὶ συντριβόμεναι τὰ εἶδη μετέβαλλον· εἶθ' οὕτω πάλιν εἰς τὸν χρυσὸν ἐκομίζοντο, δεινὰς, ὡς ἔλεγεν, ἐν ταῖς μεταβολαῖς ἀλγηδόνας ὑπομένουσαι.

But arguably the most brutal was still to come. It afflicted those who seemed to have been already released by Dike, namely those who had passed their punishment along to their children:

For whenever the soul of such a child or descendant arrived and found them, it flew at them in fury and raised a clamour against them and showed the marks of its sufferings, berating and pursuing the soul of the other, which desired to escape and hide, but could not. For they were swiftly overtaken by the tormentors and hastened back once more to serve their sentence, lamenting from foreknowledge of the penalty that awaited them. To some, he said, great clusters of the souls of descendants were attached, clinging to them like veritable swarms of bees or bats, and gibbering shrilly in angry memory of what they had suffered through their fault. (567E-F)

ὧν εἰς τινὰς ἐγγόνους ἢ παῖδας ἢ ποιῆν περιήλθεν. ὅποτε γὰρ τις ἐκείνων ἀφίκοιτο καὶ περιτύχοι, προσέπιπτεν ὀργῇ καὶ κατεβόα καὶ τὰ σημεῖα τῶν παθῶν ἐδείκνυεν, ὀνειδίζουσα καὶ διώκουσα φεύγειν καὶ ἀποκρύπτεσθαι βουλομένην οὐ δυναμένην δέ. ταχὺ γὰρ μετέθεον οἱ κολασταὶ καὶ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἀπήγον ὀλοφυρομένας τῷ προγινώσκειν τὴν τιμωρίαν. ἐνίαις δὲ καὶ πολλὰς ἅμα τῶν ἐγγόνων ἔλεγε συνηρηθῆσθαι καθάπερ μελίττας ἢ νυκτερίδας ἀτεχνῶς ἐχομένας καὶ τετριγυῖας ὑπὸ μνήμης καὶ ὀργῆς ὧν ἔπαθον δι' αὐτάς.

It is difficult to imagine a more horrifying scenario in the context of ancient shame culture: the parents stand naked with all their offenses before their children who in their lives had to suffer punishment for all of their parents' disgraceful deeds; they have no opportunity to hide, but are left defenseless to the charges of their own children.

Before Aridaios suddenly wakes again, he is shown one last image (567E-F) which is more physical than everything he had seen so far, and this is the one about reincarnation (αἱ ἐπὶ δευτέρῳ γένεσιν τρεπομέναι ψυχαί). This last vision is meant to convey the brutality when trying to reinsert the souls into "new characters and lives": the souls are forcibly (βίᾳ) reworked, filed, hammered, and bent, one set of members being welded together, another wrenched apart, and a third obliterated

completely. It is the image of a blacksmith's shop where preparation for re-entry to a new body is a torture itself.

In the *De sera nuntius vindicta*, we get a fascinating vision of the souls after death: the souls in the hereafter are not merely spiritual, they still retain a certain form of corporality which is required for several reasons. According to this account:

- a. corporality is needed as a basis for painful punishment (which is necessary for the divine to execute justice)
- b. corporality is actually the problem of these souls. It is the basis of all wickedness. The logic, therefore, is that the vices stick to the souls in very corporeal terms and, thus, can be painfully scrubbed out and the souls thus cleansed. If, however, the souls are too bound to the body and its passions, especially to the love of pleasure, despite repeated punishment, they will relapse and be carried off into new bodies (565D-E). It is the longing for pleasure, which can only be consummated in the body, that leads the souls to a new γένεσις which, since it is an inclination to bodily pleasures, is called νεύσις ἐπὶ γῆν in 566A (cf. frgm. 177 *On the soul*).
- c. corporality is what captures the individuality and personhood and thus makes a person individually recognizable. Therefore, nothing keeps us from calling these souls by the names of the former human beings (564D). This remark makes it very clear that there is a continuity between the embodied person and the disembodied soul, and that, in a very Platonic sense, it is the soul rather than the body, which carries the identity of a person. This may, however, pose the question whether the νοῦς, which is the purest part in humans (and which, according to *De facie*, is eventually separated from the soul), can still retain some individual personality.

In this picture, reincarnation only comes into play when the souls are bent to fit into further bodies. Much more important is the punishment inflicted on the individual and the idea that the soul in the hereafter keeps its individuality. Quite clearly, even the idea and the mechanics of reincarnation only serve as part of this painful process

of punishment and correction, but the idea is not supplemented by any exploration of the fate of these reincarnated souls and the beginning of a new cycle.

The pragmatics of such depictions consists in their ethical impact on the living (just consider, for comparison, the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus in Luke 16).

After all he has seen, the one who had been thought dead returns to life and experiences a total transformation to an ethically exemplary life: from “Aridaios” (the proverbial wicked) into “Thespesios” (proclaiming divine mysteries).

Henceforth, nobody can be found who is more righteous than he is, to the great amazement of everyone who had known him previously. No doubt, this is how all the readers are expected to react: change your life before it is too late!¹⁶

3) On the Moon: Arrival of the Souls and Second Death (*De facie in orbe lunae* and *De genio Socratis*)

In a mythical passage in “On the Daimonion of Socrates” (*De genio Socratis*), seemingly a historical narrative about the liberation of the Cadmea in Thebes, Plutarch develops an important part of his daemonology, again in a myth. He talks about the fate of the disembodied souls after death in a way that combines the cosmological and anthropological considerations of the tractate “On the face in the moon” (*De facie in orbe lunae*) with the ethical considerations about punishment in the *De sera*. As in *De sera*, it is assumed that reincarnation is in fact the punishment envisaged for the wicked souls, or at least the natural consequence of their inclinations towards the body. On their way back to the moon after death, the disembodied souls, like swimmers trying to reach the shore, struggle to reach the moon. The problem, however, is the rotation of the moon which threatens to fling

¹⁶ Does he contradict himself when he ridicules the fear of punishment after death in his probably early *De superstitione* 166F-167B? We have to bear in mind that Plutarch here addresses the issue in a completely different argumentative context, namely an undue fear of negative, daemonic influence on our lives (cf. Brenk, *In Mist*, 22-27, who discusses all the relevant passages on punishment after death). On the other hand, in another probably early tractate, namely the polemical treatise against the Epicurean maxim “*live unknown*,” the fate of the wicked souls, in a very similar way, is sheer oblivion (no punishment). Again, this picture has to do with Plutarch’s specific argumentative goal in this particular work: to be unknown forever is the punishment for those whose maxim in life has been to “live unknown.”

them back to the earth. In this situation God, according to Plutarch, allows some of the *daimones* (i.e., disembodied souls who have already reached the moon) to aid those individuals who are far advanced in their development and smooth them the path to the moon as the place of rest, thus escaping a further rebirth. Those who are less fortunate, however, are captured by the moon's movement and slung back to the earth and into reincarnation. But Plutarch does not seem to be interested in their further development. He is not interested theoretically in the idea of a cycle of reincarnations, but in the fate of the individual life after death, be it a blessed life in the hereafter or a punishment as we find depicted in the *De sera*.

The picture of the myth of *De genio Socratis* is supplemented by the one given in the myth of "On the Face of the Moon" (*De facie in orbe lunae*), even if caution should be exercised when trying to systematize Plutarch's myths. Arguably Plutarch's most scientific work, *De genio Socratis* makes it clearer why the Platonist Plutarch thinks about the afterlife of the souls in extremely physical, naturalistic terms, as we have already seen in *De sera numinis vindicta*. The tractate, which was translated by Johannes Kepler, the German astronomer, in the early 17th century, explores the nature of the moon broadly (e.g. is it an earthly body?).¹⁷ Kepler's interest shows how much this work was taken seriously as a scientific treatment of the questions involved.

The myth of Sulla (*De facie* 940F-945D) complements the scientific cosmological investigations with an anthropological interpretation of the the essence of the moon (and the sun, for that matter). While the overall topic of the work is the physical composition of the moon, the myth talks about the moon as the place of the souls the moon. As the moon occupies a middle place in the universe between earth and sun, the soul has a middle position between body and mind. Plutarch thus describes the

¹⁷ Still the most comprehensive treatment is H. GÖRGEMANN, *Untersuchungen zu Plutarchs Dialog De facie in orbe lunae*, Heidelberg 1970; s. also PLUTARCH, *Das Mondgesicht (De facie in orbe lunae)*, eingel., übers. und erl. v. H. GÖRGEMANN, Zürich 1968.

cosmological preconditions for a belief in reincarnation.¹⁸ These cosmological and the anthropological—or even *theo*-logical—views appear as two sides of one and the same coin. Man is composed of three parts:

In the composition of these three factors earth furnishes the body, the moon the soul, and the sun furnishes mind (to man) for the purpose of his generation... (943A)

τριῶν δὲ τούτων συμπαγέντων, τὸ μὲν σῶμα ἢ γῆ τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν ἢ σελήνην, τὸν δὲ νοῦν ὁ ἥλιος παρέσχεν εἰς τὴν γένεσιν...

The myth provides, in its anthropological perspective, an explanation of the fate of the souls after death within the larger scientific cosmological framework of the treatise (in a macrocosmos–microcosmos analogy). The moon is in fact not the final destination for the souls separated from bodies, but rather a “transit station”. After the souls have found their way to the moon, a “second death” brings about the separation of the mind (νοῦς) from the soul on the moon. The mind then returns to the sun as the realm of the divine nous (942F-943B).

Despite its scientific context this account is of course mythical, and is quite clearly introduced as such.¹⁹ Like other myths, this account is an original creation of Plutarch which leads the reader in a visionary way into a realm that is impenetrable to descriptive discourse: the world of the divine and the hereafter. Plutarch’s association of the divine and the cosmological reflects then a naturalist view of the soul’s reincarnation as a further part of a divine realm ruled by similarly natural order.

4. The God of the Dead or the God of the Living? Physical Life and Real Life after Death (*De Iside et Osiride*)

Yet another picture emerges if we look at a passage at the end of Plutarch’s interpretation of Egyptian religious lore in *De Iside et Osiride*.²⁰ The passage shows quite a different individual eschatology which is rather close to the Gospel of John—and to Philo, for that matter. Reincarnation is not in view here. Rather, the passage is

¹⁸ As does Paul in 1Cor 15.

¹⁹ As Plato had already made clear, mythic discourse assumes importance where discourse *κατά λόγον* reaches its boundaries and only a “probable myth” (Tim. 29a-d) can be recounted.

²⁰ R. Feldmeier, *Osiris. Der Gott der Toten als Gott des Lebens. De Iside Kap. 76-78*, in: R. Hirsch-Luipold (Hg.), *Gott und die Götter bei Plutarch. Götterbilder–Gottesbilder–Weltbilder*, RGTV 54, Berlin/New York 2005, 215–227 [=Id., *Der Höchste*, WUNT 330, Tübingen 2014, 79–90.

all about new, and real, life. At the end of his treatise, Plutarch treats some seemingly problematic aspects of Egyptian tradition (after he has already dealt with such issues as Egyptian animal worship). How can the Egyptians possibly claim that their most important god (Osiris) is in fact the god of the dead?

... since it is not understood in what manner this is true, it greatly disturbs the majority of people who suspect that the holy and sacred Osiris truly dwells in the earth and beneath the earth, where are hidden away the bodies of those that are believed to have reached their end. But he himself is far removed from the earth, uncontaminated and unpolluted and pure from all matter that is subject to destruction and death; but for the souls of men here, which are compassed about by bodies and emotions, there is no association with this god except insofar as they may attain to a dim vision of his presence by means of the apprehension which philosophy affords. But when these souls are set free and migrate into the realm of the invisible and the unseen, the dispassionate and the pure, then this god becomes their leader and king, since it is on him that they are bound to be dependent in their insatiate contemplation and yearning for that beauty which is for men unutterable and indescribable. (382E-383A).

ἀγνοούμενον ὅπως ἀληθές ἐστι, διαταράττει τοὺς πολλοὺς ὑπονοοῦντας ἐν γῆ καὶ ὑπὸ γῆν τὸν ἱερόν καὶ ὄσιον ὡς ἀληθῶς Ὅσιριν οἰκεῖν, ὅπου τὰ σώματα κρύπτεται τῶν τέλος ἔχειν δοκούντων. ὁ δ' ἐστι μὲν αὐτὸς ἀπωτάτω τῆς γῆς ἄχραντος καὶ ἀμίαντος (F) καὶ καθαρὸς οὐσίας ἀπάσης φθορὰν δεχομένης καὶ θάνατον, ἀνθρώπων δὲ ψυχαῖς ἐνταυθοῖ μὲν ὑπὸ σωμάτων καὶ παθῶν περιεχομέναις οὐκ ἔστι μετουσία τοῦ θεοῦ πλὴν ὅσον ὄνειδος ἀμαυροῦ θιγεῖν νοήσει διὰ φιλοσοφίας· ὅταν δ' ἀπολυθεῖσαι μεταστῶσιν εἰς τὸ 383 (A) αἰδέες καὶ ἀόρατον καὶ ἀπαθές καὶ ἀγνόν, οὗτος αὐταῖς ἡγεμὼν ἐστι καὶ βασιλεὺς ὁ θεὸς ἐξηρημέναις ὡς ἂν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ θεωμέναις ἀπλήστως καὶ ποθούσαις τὸ μὴ φατὸν μηδὲ ῥητὸν ἀνθρώποις κάλλος.

In this passage we find the idea that death is a separation from the troublesome mortal body and thus a path to real, lasting life. In a Platonic framework, it thus makes good sense to view Osiris, the god of the dead, as the highest god. (Physical) death is in fact the prerequisite for real life of the disembodied souls in contemplative association with the divine.

Conclusion:

We have to resist to force Plutarch's various contextually bound remarks on afterlife and reincarnation too strongly into a coherent picture. But there are some interesting tendencies, nevertheless:

1. Plutarch believes in an afterlife of the disembodied souls. This is standard for the Platonist, and Plutarch stresses that it is also taught by religious customs and beliefs.
2. Prerequisite of the idea of afterlife and reincarnation is of course the separation of the soul from the body at death. Plutarch, however, works with a tripartite view of the human being (body/soul/mind).²¹ Therefore he plays with the idea of a "second death" which will bring about the separation of the *nous* from the soul (*De facie*). This poses the question whether it is the soul in the end what preserves the personality beyond death.
3. The belief in a afterlife of the soul seems necessary
 - a. mainly on ethical grounds: it encourages an ethical life;
 - b. on theological grounds: the justice of the divine cannot be retained unless there is the possibility of divine retribution after bodily life has ended (*De sera*).
 - c. For consolation in the face of death (*Consolatio ad uxorem*)
4. Despite the language of reincarnation, one gets the feeling that Plutarch basically has a unilinear view of life and death and what is going to happen after death: either, the soul is brought back to its original, real life (just think of the *Consolatio*), or it is subjected to some form of punishment, be it reincarnation or sheer extinction (both from existence and from memory). He

²¹ Cf. L. Roig Lancillotta, Plutarch's Anthropology and Its Influence on His Cosmological Framework, in: M. Meussen/L. Van der Stockt (eds.), *Natural Sectaculars. Aspects of Plutarch's Philosophy of Nature*, Leuven 2015, 179-198.

seems to be little interested in a cycle of reincarnations, but rather in the fate of the individual after death.²²

5. There are different concepts for the punishment for the wicked souls. In his earlier writings he seems to have played with the idea of eternal extinction from memory (but of course: non-visibility is the topic of his polemic against the Epicurean maxim: Live unknown!) while in *De genio* some souls do not reach the moon and fall back into bodily existence, and in *De sera* especially post-mortal punishment is quintessential. In what is maybe his last writing, *De Iside*, we only have a vision of souls who live in union with Osiris, the divine logos.
6. With view to the standpoint of Early Imperial religious Platonism it can be cautiously concluded that while reincarnation and an afterlife of the soul is a given for every Platonist, it is not so much a theory of the soul what they are interested in. Rather, it is the fate of the individual after death, its relationship to the Divine and the possibilities for retribution and reward.

²² Plato's theory of *anamnesis*, for instance does not seem to play any role at all.

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