Deformity (anapēria):
Plutarch’s Views of Reproduction and Imperfect Generation in the Moralia and Lives

Zlatko Plesė

Introduction

The subject of this paper is Plutarch’s indebtedness to Aristotle and his theory of natural reproduction. More specifically, it deals with Plutarch’s appropriation of Aristotle’s view of deformity (anapēria) as a necessary deviation from the normative pattern in natural reproduction and with the heuristic role this concept plays in some important passages from the Moralia and Lives. As I plan to demonstrate in the ensuing pages, the Aristotelian model performs a triple role in Plutarch’s writings. First, it acts as a rationalist critique of the religious representation of deformity as something exceptional and therefore portentous, tabooed, and abominable; secondly, it serves as an ‘intertext’ conjoining two heterogeneous modes of discourse – viz., the symbolic theology of the wise ‘barbarians’ and Plato’s philosophy; and finally, it provides an analogue, or ‘paradigm’, capable of elucidating the obscurities of Plato’s cosmological account in the Timaeus.

Deformity in Aristotle’s biological theory

Deformity (anapēria) is a term with a wide range of applications in Aristotle’s reproductive theory.¹ It encompasses every defect in offspring from, in a descending order, a more regular type (the female) to less frequent phenomena (a ‘human’ bearing no similarity to parents) and, finally, to exceptional cases of monstrosity (‘animal only’, having not even the appearance of a human being, i.e., monstrosity proper). Deformity thus denotes any departure from the natural pattern, which, “in all living beings where the male and female are separate” (Gen. an. 2.4.741b2–4), Aristotle identifies as the male offspring.

---

¹ For Aristotle’s reproductive theory, including his views of deformity, see, among others, Le Blond, Happ, Preus, Verdenius, Cooper, Lloyd, and Bolton.
 bearing the individual characteristics of his father.\textsuperscript{2} The formation of the female offspring is for Aristotle “the first beginning of this deviation” (4.2.767b6–8),\textsuperscript{3} occurring when the male element or the seed, which provides the form and the source of movement, fails to gain a full mastery (\textit{kratein}) over the female contributing factor, the menses. In teleological terms, Nature, which stands for the final cause, gets circumscribed in producing a desired effect by material constraints. But even when an offspring is born female, Nature can still turn this failure into an advantage because, as Aristotle argues, “the race of creatures which are separated into male and female has got to be kept in being” (4.2.767b 9–10). This kind of higher purpose is denied to irregular or monstrous deformities, which are “not necessary so far as the purposive or final cause is concerned” (4.2.767b13–14), belonging instead to “the class of things contrary to nature” (770b9–10). Yet Aristotle tolerates even the bottom of his scale of being – for, as he puts it, “even that which is contrary to nature is, in a way, in accordance with Nature” (770b15–16). Monstrosity (\textit{teras}) is an exceptional outcome that stands at odds with what happens in the generality of cases (\textit{hós epí polu}); yet this is still an outcome in accordance with Nature because it arises from the very same struggle for mastery between two forces that governs all of natural reproduction – the struggle between the male and the female, or, in more general terms, the struggle between Nature, which always acts purposefully, and the blind Necessity of matter. In the words of Themistius, the fourth-century A.D. commentator of Aristotle,

What comes to be out of a man is, in most cases, a man; if not, then a woman; otherwise an animal; otherwise, in the end, mere flesh – but never a plane-tree. (\textit{In Arist. Phys. Paraphr. 61, 30–62, 1 Schenk})

\textsuperscript{2} The process is described in full in \textit{Gen. an.} 4.2.767b6–23: παρεκβέβηκε γάρ ἡ φύσις ἐν τούτοις ἐκ τοῦ γένους τρόπον τινά. ἄρχῃ δὲ πρώτῃ τὸ ἡθελ γίνεσθαι καὶ μὴ ἄρρην. ἄλλ’ αὕτη μὲν ἀναγκαία τῇ φύσει, δεῖ γὰρ σώζεσθαι τὸ γένος τῶν κεχορισμένων κατὰ τὸ ἡθελ καὶ τὸ ἄρρην ἐνδεχομένου δὲ μὴ κρατεῖν ποτὲ τὸ ἄρρην ἢ διὰ νέοτητα ἢ γήρας ἢ δ’ ἄλλην τινὰ αἴτιαν τοιαύτην, ἀνάγκη γίνεσθαι ἡθελοκοιν ἐν τοῖς ζώοις. τὸ δὲ τέρας οὐκ ἀναγκαῖον πρὸς τὴν ἑνικὰ τοῦ καὶ τὴν τοῦ τέλους αἴτιαν, ἄλλα κατὰ συμβεβηκός ἀναγκαῖον ἐπεί τὴν γ’ ἄρχην ἐντεῦθεν δεῖ λαμβάνειν. εὐπέπτου μὲν γὰρ οὐσία τῆς περιττώσεως ἐν τοῖς καταμνίσιοις τῆς σπερματικῆς, καθ’ αὕτην ποιηθεὶ τὴν μορφήν ἢ τοῦ ἀρρηνοῦ κίνησις … ὅστε κρατοῦσα μὲν ἄρρην τε ποιηθεὶ καὶ οὐ ἡθελ, καὶ ἕακός τὸ γεννώντι ἄλλ’ οὐ τῇ μητρί· μὴ κρατήσασα δὲ, καθ’ ὅποιαν ἀν μὴ κρατήσῃ δύναμιν, τὴν ἔλειμφαν ποιεῖ κατ’ αὕτην.

\textsuperscript{3} Females are defined in terms of their inability to concoct nourishment into semen; cf. \textit{Gen. an.} 4.6.775a11–16: “Once birth has taken place, everything reaches its perfection sooner in females than in males – for example, puberty, maturity, old age – because females are weaker and colder in their nature; and so we should look upon the female condition as a kind of “natural deformity” (καί δεῖ ὑπολαμβάνειν ὡσπερ ἀναπηριαν εἶναι τὴν ἡθελότητα φυσικήν).
The Aristotelian formula is rather simple: the more power exerted by the material cause, the greater the offspring’s degradation. First, the male sex turns into its female opposite. Then, as the gradual relapsing process (*huesthai*) continues, all individual characteristics (*to kath’ hekaston, tode ti*, or the primary substance), first of the father and his family, next of the mother and her relatives alike, are removed, to the point at which “all that remains is just a human being” (4.3.768b11–13 *to koinon, i.e., eidos*, or the secondary substance *qua* species). At the bottom of this scale we find monstrous deformities devoid of any gender-, individual, and species-characteristics (769b14 *to katholou, i.e., genos*, or, in logical terms, the secondary substance *qua* genus), which occur when matter “does not get mastered” (769b12) but the male, by virtue of this seed, still manages to supply the “sentient soul,” or “that in which an animal is animal” (2.3.736b1 *tên aisthêtikên [psukhên] kath’ hên zóion*). When a form-bearing male is completely absent, we enter the realm of spontaneous generation. In these cases, the female assumes an active role and, in conjunction with environmental factors, produces a creature endowed solely with the nutritive function.

To sum it up, Aristotle’s view of deformity is a corollary of his teleological explanation of natural reproduction. The phenomenon is described in various discursive modes: taxonomically, in terms of degradation from the norms provided by the highest animals on the scale; physically, in terms of the reduced capacity of living beings to concoct their nourishment; logically, in terms of the gradual loss of species-specific characteristics; and metaphysically, in terms of the form-matter dichotomy, where matter resists the mastery of the form and, depending on the degree of resistance, gives birth to various types of anomalous specimens.

Plutarch’s familiarity with Aristotle’s discussions of natural deformities can be indirectly deduced from various passages in his *Table Talks*. These passages betray a thorough, first-hand knowledge of Aristotle’s theory of conception – from its starting hypothesis, namely that the female “merely contributes matter and nourishment to the seed from the male” (*Quast. conv.* 3.4.651C) to such technical issues as spontaneous generation, the natural constitution of wind-eggs, or the relationship between the capacities and activities of the male seed (2.3.6.635E ff.). Turning to direct evidence, Plutarch’s usage of the term *pêros* and its derivates and compounds is not in itself a reliable criterion for asserting his knowledge of Aristotle’s theory of deformity. A direct influence seems plausible only in the passages where Plutarch employs terms like *perôsis* or *anapêria* in conjunction with other relevant Aristotelian concepts – for example, with such notions as *phusis*, ‘nature’, *telos*, ‘purpose’, or *hulê*, ‘matter’. For deformity, in the way in which Aristotle makes use of this term, always invokes the idea of nature as *telos* and purposeful activity, as well as the notion of ‘unruly matter’ as the ultimate cause of any natural degradation.
Aristotle’s notion of ‘deformity’ and Plutarch’s critique of religious discourse

There is a passage in the Life of Publicola which, for its association of deformity with nature as telos, seems to point to a direct Aristotelian influence. The passage runs as follows:

The following year Publicola was again a consul, for the fourth time, when there was expectation of a war with the joined forces of the Sabines and Latins. At the very same time a sort of superstitious awe (tis … deisidaimonia) seized upon the city; for all women who were pregnant at that time delivered of deformed offspring (ekseballon anapërta), and not a single birth reached its end-result (kai telos oudemia genesis eskhen). Wherefore, by direction of the Sibylline books, Publicola enacted expiatory rites for Hades and introduced certain games recommended by the oracle of Pythia, and having thus rendered the city more confident in its expectations from the divine power, he turned his attention to what it feared from men. (Publ. 21.107F–108A)4

The Aristotelian explanation of deformity as the incapacity to carry the natural process of birth to its end-result (telos) serves here as an oblique rationalist critique of the Roman religious discourse, for which all sorts of natural anomalies represent dangerous prodigies and signify a major disruption in the relationship with the divine sphere. For Plutarch, the traditional religious handling of prodigies is “a sort of superstition” (tis … deisidaimonia), including the predictions based on the occurrence of deformed offspring and all of the remedies (remedia) undertaken to restore the broken covenant with the gods (pax deorum), from the priestly response based on the Sibylline books and expiatory rites (expiatio) intended to placate Dis Pater to consultation of the Delphic oracle and the game-offering. As in many other discussions of extraordinary phenomena and their religious handling in the Lives and Moralia, Plutarch once again prefers the naturalist explanation based on verifiable evidence over the religious treatment of deformity as an ominous sign of divine displeasure.5

---

4 Τῷ δὲ ἔξῆς ἐτεί πάλιν ὑπάστευε Ποπλικόλασ τὸ τέταρτον: ἦν δὲ προσθοκία πολέμου Σαβίνων καὶ Λατίνων συνισταμένων. Καὶ τῆς ἀμα δεισιδαιμονία τῆς πόλεως ἠγατο-πᾶσι γὰρ αἱ κυοῦσι τότε γυναῖκες ἐξεβάλλον ἀνάπτηρα, καὶ τέλος οὐδεμία γένεσις ἔσχεν. Ὁσιαν ἐκ τῶν Σιβυλλίων ὁ Ποπλικόλας ἰλασάμενος τῷ Ἀιδὶ καὶ τινὸς ἀγώνας πολυχρήστους ἀγαγών καὶ ταῖς ἐλπίσι πρὸς τὸ θεόν ἡδίονα καταστήσας τὴν πόλιν, ἡδή τοῖς ἀπ’ ἀνθρώπων φοβεροῖς προσεῖδέχετε.

5 See, for example, Plutarch’s preference for Lamprias’ scientific solution to the evanescence of oracles over Cleombrotus’s ‘demonological’ explanation in On Oracles in Decline (Def. or.). On prodigies in Roman religion and their careful handling by a special college of priests (at first duoviri, later decemviri sacris faciundis) in charge of advising the senate on the content of the Sibylline ‘Greek’ Books, see Bloch, MacBain, North, 37–40, and esp. Rosenberger. Plutarch’s labeling of this traditional medium of
Deformity as ‘intertext’

Aristotle’s discourse of deformity plays an important interpretive role in Plutarch’s essay on Egyptian religion, On Isis and Osiris. One of the main objectives of the treatise is to lay down the exegetical program capable of “binding the theology of the Egyptians by ties of kindred (sunoikeiountos) with [Plato’s] philosophy” (De Is. et Os. 48.371A). The conjoining of these two heterogeneous traditions is not effected through allegorical translation, for allegory, as Plutarch argues in his critique of Stoic exegesis of Egyptian myth (45.369A), is overly fixed, artificial, and restrictive in dealing with the polyvalence of Egyptian myths and symbols. What makes Plato’s philosophy a better guide in attaining the meaning of Oriental wisdom is the ‘visionary’ or epoptic character of its dialectical method. Plato’s upward movement of generalization, as described in the Republic (509d–511e) and in the Symposium (201d–212c), leads to a sudden self-disclosure of metaphysical reality and its non-linguistic core in the same way in which the juxtaposition of various symbolic ‘codes’ in the mystery cult of Isis causes the spark of intuition to leap across from these visible codes to their invisible presupposition. In this bold attempt at uniting the upward path of Plato’s hypothetical method and Egyptian symbolic lore, Plutarch resorts to Aristotle as an important analogous link, an ‘intertext’.

The importance of Aristotle in this philosophical evaluation of Egyptian religion is clearly acknowledged on two occasions – first, in Plutarch’s analysis of the interaction of Osiris and Isis at the physical level (60.375C), and secondly, in the climactic section of the treatise, where Aristotle is cited alongside Plato as a representative of the “visionary branch of philosophy” (7.382D). And indeed, Aristotle’s substrate–and–opposites model from the Physics provides the simplest explanation of the relationship between Osiris (‘form’), Isis (‘matter striving for form’), and Typhon (‘privation of form’). Furthermore, Aristotle’s notion of connected homonymy enables Plutarch to adopt the global, metaphysical attitude towards the myth of Isis and Osiris and to attain the highest level of generalization in his upward path toward grasping “the pure truth” (77.382E) of the Egyptian lore. For Plutarch, the Egyptian goddess Isis represents ‘matter’ (hulē) in a homonymous sense, that is, matter (hulē) in its primary or focal meaning of a qualified substrate (58.374E–375A),

communication between the Romans and their gods as ‘superstition’ hints at his ambivalent positioning vis-à-vis Rome and its cultural heritage. This kind of behavior can be qualified as ‘mimicry’ – a tendency among the local Greek élites to treat the culture of the ruling (Roman) power as contiguous and comparable with their own traditions (hence the sunkrisis of, say, Solon and Publicola, and the whole project of construing the collection of ‘parallel lives’), yet still inferior, less ‘enlightened’, and often verging on the irrational and barbaric.
encompassing in itself all of its derivative uses and specific applications. Isis, in short, encompasses various aspects of ‘matter’, from prime matter striving for form and the simple soul desiring the intellect to Nature yearning for rational order and purpose (*telos*).\(^6\)

Returning to Aristotle’s theory of deformity and its ‘intertextual’ function in *On Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch brings it into discussion while commenting on the stage in the Egyptian myth when “gods were still in the womb of [the primordial goddess] Rhea” (53.373B) and when Isis, already in love with her future husband Osiris, “united [with him] in the darkness of [Rhea’s] womb” (12.356A) and gave birth to Horus the Elder, or Apollo, a “deformed” (*anapéron*) semblance of the visible “world to come”, typified as Horus the Younger (54. 373A–C). The whole passage runs as follows:

For that which exists, and which is intelligible and good, is stronger than passing away and change. And the images which the corporeal and perceptible molds out of it, and the *logoi*, figures, and likenesses which it assumes, are like impressions stamped on wax in that they do not endure for ever. But they are seized by the disorderly and confusing element, driven here from the space above and fighting against Horus, whom Isis brings forth as a likeness of the intelligible, because he is the perceptible world. This is why he is said to be charged with illegitimacy by Typhon as one who is neither pure nor genuine like his father, who is Reason itself, unmixed and dispassionate, but is made spurious by matter because of corporeality. But he [i.e. Horus] overcomes and wins the day since Hermes, who is Reason, bears witness to him and demonstrates that Nature produces the world upon being remodeled according to the intelligible (*pros to noēton hē plhūsī metaskhēmatizomenē*). For it is the procreation of Apollo by Isis and Osiris, one which occurred when the gods were still in the womb of Rhea, that suggests symbolically that before this world became manifest and perfected by reason (cf. *Tim.* 52d2–4), †matter, being exposed\(^1\) by its nature as imperfect in itself, brought forth the first creation† (*ten hulēn phusei elenkhomenēn ep’ autēn atelē tēn prótēn genesin eksenēkein*). For this reason they say that that god [i.e., Apollo] was born deformed in the darkness (*anapéron kai hupo skotōi genesthai*), and call him the elder

---

\(^6\) See Plese, 371–372.

\(^7\) The same participial form of έληγχοσσι occurs in 38.366B: “Whenever the Nile … approaches the outlying regions beyond, they call this the union of Osiris and Nephthys, which is exposed (έληγχουνίνη) by the sprouting plants”. Here, too, the verb carries a negative connotation – the union of Osiris and Nephthys was illegitimate and Anubis, their offspring, “born illicitly” (366C σκότθων). *Elenchos* as the method of examining a person’s assertion often implies the ignorant state of that person and the falsehood of his suppositions; cf. Robinson, 7–19 and Kahn, *passim*. Just as Nephthys’s union with Osiris is disclosed as illegitimate, so too Isis is blamed, or exposed, on account of her imperfection (έπελητή) and the incapacity to achieve a desired goal (τέλος).
Horus – for he was not the world, but only a semblance and apparition of the world to come (eidōlon ti kai kosmou phantasina mellontos).\(^8\)

In this passage, Plutarch schematizes a rather complex set of ancient Egyptian and Hellenistic representations of Horus\(^9\) into two principal forms. The first is Aroueris or the elder Horus, born by Isis and Osiris “when the gods were still in the womb of Rhea” (De Is. et Os. 54.373A–B), and the second is Horus the son of Isis and Osiris, the legitimate heir to his father’s throne. Plutarch sees in this distinction yet another sign that Egyptian wisdom is indeed bound “by ties of kindred” with Platonic philosophy. The two forms of Horus correspond to the contrast between the precosmic chaos and the present perceptible universe – a problematic reading of the *Timaeus* inferred from two

---

\(^8\) The Greek text is from Sieveking’s Teubner edition: τὸ γὰρ ὄν καὶ νοητὸν καὶ ἄγαθὸν φθορὰς καὶ μεταβολὴς κρείττον ἐστὶ: δὲ δ’ ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ τὸ αἰσθητὸν καὶ σωματικὸν εἰκόνα ἐκμάττεται καὶ λόγους καὶ ἐνδή καὶ ὑμιστικὰς ἀναλαμβάνει, καθάπερ ἐν κηρῷ σφραγίζει ὦκ’ ἀδιανύμωσιν ἄλλα καταλαμβάνει τὸ ἄτακτον αὐτὰς καὶ ταραχοῖδες ἐνταῦθα τῆς ἀνω χώρας ἀπειλημμένου καὶ μαχώμενον πρὸς τὸ άρον, ἢ ἢ ᾗς εἰκόνα τοῦ νοητοῦ κόσμου αἰσθητῶν ὄντα γεννᾷ· διὸ καὶ δικήν φύσει λέγεται νοθεία ὑπὸ Τυφώνος, ὡς ὦκ’ ἄν καθαρός ὀφθ’ εἰλικρίνησι αἰόσ ὅ πατὴρ, λόγος αὐτὸς καθ’ εὐαν ἀμήγης καὶ ἀπαθῆς, ἄλλα νενεθεμένου τῇ ἔλει διὰ τὸ σωματικὸν, περιγίνεται δὲ καὶ νικᾷ τὸν Ἐρμοῦ, τοπίτατο τοῦ λόγου, μαρτυροῦντος καὶ δεικνύοντος, ὅτι πρὸς τὸ νοητὸν ἢ φύσις μετασχηματισμένην τοῦ κόσμου ἀποδίδουσιν, ἢ μὲν γὰρ ἐτὶ τῶν θεῶν ἐν γαστρὶ τῆς Ρέας ὄντων ἢ Ἰαῖδος καὶ Ὀσίριδος λεγομένη γένεσις Ἀπόλλωνος αἰνίττεται τὸ πρῶν ἥκραφαι γενέσθαι τόνδε τοῦ κόσμου καὶ συντελεσθῆναι τῇ λόγῳ τῆς ὑπὸ φύσει ἑλεγχουμένη ἐπ’ αὐτὴν ἀπελθήτι τῆς πρώτης γένεσις ἐξενεχεῖν· διὸ καὶ φασὶ τῶν θεῶν ἔκεινον ἀνάπτυρον ὑπὸ σκότωρ γενέσθαι καὶ πρεσβύτερον ἱρɔν καλοῦσιν· οὐ γὰρ ἤν κόσμος, ἀλλ’ εἰδωλόν τι καὶ κόσμου φάντασμα ἑλλήνως. The phrase enclosed by asterisks has been viewed as corrupt by most editors and commentators: Plutarch’s avoidance of the hiatus was so notorious that φύσει ἑλεγχουμένη appears an impossible reading. Bernardakis conjectured τὴν φύσιν, Sieveking obelized the phrase, while Griffiths, 204 decided to tolerate the hiatus. Yet Plutarch himself does not seem to have been as rigid in these matters as his modern editors: there are passages in the *Moralia* where he makes ironical remarks about Isocrates’ purism, including the invariable practice of avoiding the hiatus (Glor. Ath. 350E; cf. De vit. pud. 534F, De aud. 42D). The emendations of the above phrase by Theiler, 398 and Froidefond, 63–71 deserve a separate treatment. At this place, it suffices to point out that both proposals are intriguing yet overly radical, in that they tend to disregard the immediate context of the ‘corrupted’ phrase and alter the word-order in a rather arbitrary fashion. For these reasons, I still find the manuscript reading, as given above, more plausible, primarily because it conveys the crucial contrast between two modalities of Isis – “imperfect matter” vs. “remodeled nature” – and their respective products, viz. the pre-cosmic chaos (Horus the Elder) and the visible universe (Horus the Younger). See also Ferrari, 51–55.

---

\(^9\) E.g., *Hr Wr* or *Haroeris*, the royal Horus, representing the living king; *Harsieri*, Horus the Son of Isis (and Osiris); *Hr-p3-hrd* or *Harparocrates*, Horus the Child, procreated posthumously by Osiris, and persistently depicted as a sitting child, sometimes with feeble legs and with a finger in his mouth. See Griffiths, 59–60, 307–308, 337–38, 353–54, 505–506.
passages which, with a certain amount of textual editing, may indeed appear as referring to two separate cosmic stages, viz. “the present situation” (50c7–d1 en d’oun toì parontì) and the stage “before heaven came to be” (52d2–4 kai prin ouranon genesthai).\(^\text{10}\) Furthermore, the precosmic Horus and his perfect cosmic counterpart stand in the same ontological relationship as the two kinds of images postulated in Plato’s *Sophist* (235c–236c, 264d–268d) The former is a distorted “semblance and apparition,” *eidolon* and *phantasma* (*De Is. et Os. 373C*), capable of reproducing only the external resemblance to its model, while the latter is a “likeness” or *eikon*, a well-founded image endowed with a structural resemblance to the preordered pattern of ideas (373A–B).

And yet, Plutarch does not consider Plato’s two-stage cosmogony a sufficient interpretive key for the double procreation by Isis and Osiris – rather, the Platonic model is engaged in the process of reinterpretation from the perspective of Aristotle’s theory of causation. The use of Aristotle as an ‘intertext’ is particularly visible in Plutarch’s treatment of the complex figure of Isis. Plato’s identification of the lowest principle as “space” (*khôra*), which he further explains as the “receptacle to becoming” and compares it to the “mother” of all creation, provides a promising yet incomplete solution in that it fails to account for Isis’ erotic yearning for the divine consort. Aristotle’s concept of matter, *hulê*, turns out to be a better analogue inasmuch as it conveys all of Isis’ conflicting drives – her desire to procreate and her inability to achieve this goal without the male consort, her natural longing for the most beautiful outcome and her innate resistance to the consort’s directive power. And indeed, matter in Aristotle’s system is simultaneously a “joined cause” of

\(^\text{10}\) In the first passage (50c7–d1), Plato says that, “in the present situation (en òv òn tò poònti) we must conceive three things – that which becomes (tò γιγνόμενον), that in which it becomes (tò òv òv γίγνεται), and that in whose likeness what becomes is born (tò òv òv δεν ἄφορωομενον φύεται τò γιγνόμενον) … and compare the recipient (tò δεχόμενον) to a mother, that from which (tò òv òv òe) to a father, and the nature between them (tò òv òe μεταξὺ τοῦτων φύσιν) to their offspring”. In the second passage (52d2–4), Plato again enumerates the three levels of reality, but in a different wording – “being (òδ), space (òχώρον), and becoming (γένεσιν)” – adding that these “three distinct things existed even before the heaven [viz. the visible universe] came to be (καὶ πρὶν οὐρανὸν γενέσθαι)”. Plutarch proposes a similar diachronic reading of Plato’s account of creation in his *On Generation of the Soul of the Timaeus*. The only difference in comparison with *On Isis and Osiris* is the problematic identification of *genesis* with the pre-cosmic soul:

“Before the heaven came to be” (*Tim. 52d2–4*) “Present situation” (*Tim. 50c7–d1*)

\( \text{àn tò òv òe} \) 

\( \text{γένεσις (pre-cosmic soul)} \) 

\( \text{tí géignomein (visible universe)} \)

\( \text{òχώρα tò òv òv} \)

\(^{11}\) See, for example, *The Contending of Horus and Seth* 3.7 ff. Another example of Plutarch’s disagreement with the *Timaeus* is the identification of the substrate upon which the rational regulating principle (Osiris) exerts its ordering activity. In the *Timaeus*, the
form, “like a mother … yearning for what is divine and good” (*Phys.* 1.9.192a13–14, 17–18), and the unruly factor resisting the mastery of form (*Gen. an.* 4.3.769b13 ῥῆ δ’ ἁλῆς οὗ kratoumenēς). This is why, in the passages describing the precosmic Isis and her first creation, the elder Horus, Aristotle’s discourse of deformity plays such a prominent role. Plutarch describes Isis as “matter lacking of itself in Good (*De Is. et Os.* 57.374D τὴν ἁλῆν … endean men ousan autēn kath’ hautēν) but “having an innate love” for a better principle (53.372E ἐκχει de sumphuton er/C244τα); and also as “imperfect by nature” (54.373C phusei … atelē), that is, devoid of rational purpose, and thereby responsible for the premature birth of a deformity, the elder Horus, whom Egyptian theology and iconography portrays as “feeble in his limbs.”

The complexity of Plutarch’s interpretive strategy is given below, in a tabular form. In order to elucidate the Egyptian account of the precosmic procreation of the “deformed” elder Horus, Plutarch first brings in the homologous tripartite structure of the universe “before heaven came to be” from the *Timaeus*. This Platonic schema of representation is further revised and amplified through the intercession of a partly compatible *substrate-and-opposites* model borrowed from Aristotle. The end result of this juxtaposition of heterogeneous yet analogous inputs is a sort of palimpsest in which, in spite of all the excisions and erasures, there still appear traces, some tenuous and some clearly visible, of all the previous hands—of Egyptian sages as well as of Plato and Aristotle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Egyptian Lore (Gods in Rhea’s Womb)</th>
<th>Plato, <em>Tim.</em> 52d2–4 (Before Heaven Came to Be)</th>
<th>Aristotle (Matter Not Mastered)</th>
<th>Plutarch (Before the Visible World)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Osiris</td>
<td>Being</td>
<td>Form</td>
<td>Intelligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Elder Horus</td>
<td>Becoming</td>
<td>Deformity</td>
<td>Realm, Reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isis</td>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Matter:</td>
<td>First Becoming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(i) Form-Yearning</td>
<td>(phantasma)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(ii) Unruly</td>
<td>Matter (hulē):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(i) Animate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(ouk apsukhon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(ii) Imperfect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(atelē)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

substrate that the demiurge provides with “a distinct configuration by means of shapes and numbers” consists of the “vestiges” of elements (*Tim.* 53b2–5); Plutarch, in his turn, identifies this substrate with Isis—“matter” (hulē). If his objective was indeed a perfect
Deformity as ‘paradigm’

Besides acting as an ‘intertext’ smoothing over the differences between the Egyptian and Platonic accounts of the precosmic stage, Aristotle’s discourse of natural production and deformity plays yet another important role in the above-discussed passage from On Isis and Osiris – it functions as a ‘paradigm’, a term by which Plato and his ancient followers meant what we usually call analogy. As Plato explains the meaning of this term in the Statesman (277d1–3),

> It is a hard thing … to indicate (eindeknusthai) any of the greater subjects without using illustrative models (paradeigmata). For each of us knows everything in a dream as it were and at the same time, again, is ignorant of everything with his waking mind.

Plato’s “third genus” or “space” (khôra) is one such “greater subject,” something we look upon “as in a dream” (Tim. 52b3–4 pros ho dé kai oneiropoloumen blepontes) because we cannot comprehend it by senses or grasp it by intellection. Space is the subject that belongs to the realm of “bastard reasoning” (52b3 hapton logismôi tîni nothôi), in which the logical methods of division and demonstration must give way to the juxtaposition of such metaphorical expressions as “receptacle” (dekhomenon), “place” (topos), “nurse” (tithênê), “mother” (mêter), “winnowing basket” (organon seismon parekhon), or the “mold” used in the lost-wax method of casting bronze (ekmageion). A similar interpretive problem arises when one attempts to explain the production of elemental vestiges moving to-and-fro in this unfathomable space. The problem is, in short, that the only two principles capable of triggering this production, viz. form and space, are posited in the Timaeus as incompatible opposites which, insofar as they are eternal and unchanging, cannot themselves occasion any change or becoming. Plato’s solution is non-committal, more the statement of a problem than a satisfactory rational solution. “The shifting copies of the eternal things,” he says, “are impressions taken from them and stamped into space in a strange manner that is hard to express” (50c5–6 tropon tîna dusphraston kai thaumaston). Plutarch’s solution in On the Generation of the Soul is what one would expect from an ‘orthodox’ Platonist, in that he posits space and form as contraries that allow an intermediate principle. This principle he identifies as the “self-moving” irrational soul, capable of “taking impressions from the eternal things,” “stamping them” into the receptacle, and setting them into disorderly congruence of the Egyptian myth with the Timaeus, then the substrate undergoing rational remodeling should correspond to the elder Horus, not to Isis.
motion. In *On Isis and Osiris*, however, Plutarch resorts to Aristotle’s theory of causation as a more fitting ‘paradigm’ inasmuch as it can account for the interaction between form and its substrate without introducing an intermediate. According to the first book of Aristotle’s *Physics*, a thing’s becoming is due to the work of only two principles, viz. form and matter, which act like “joint causes of things which come to be” (1.9.192a13–14). The details of this interaction are further elaborated in Aristotle’s account of biological reproduction. The semen, which acts both as the form and efficient cause, encounters the menses, *alias* the matter, yet does not mix up with it – just as, in Aristotle’s words, “nothing passes from the carpenter into the pieces of timber” (*Gen. an.* 1.22.730b8–25). The work of the semen is to “cause by its power (*dunamis*) the matter and nourishment in the female to take on a particular character” (730a15–18), that is, to actualize the residue’s potential without becoming part of the developing embryo.

Conclusion

Besides showing his preference for the rationalist interpretation of ‘prodigies’ (*Publ.* 21), Plutarch’s appropriation of the Aristotelian account of deformity (*anapèdia*) as both an ‘interxtext’ (*De Is. et Os.* 54) and heuristic ‘paradigm’ (ibid.) is also a good illustration of his overall exegetical approach to the work of Plato, the venerable teacher – a text not only to scrutinize but also to develop its virtualities by resorting to compatible elements from the writings of worthy successors. For Plutarch, the reconstitution of Plato’s original intent (*dianoia*) cannot be achieved without referring to the series of intervening texts as the only available means of closing the gap between the historical and cultural situation of the master and that of his faithful interpreter. Plutarch’s hermeneutics thus goes beyond a mere cross-referential reading of the Platonic corpus (*Platonem ex Platone*) by engaging it in an ongoing critical dialogue with past exegetical achievements.

12 “Of things that do exist, neither that which is good nor what is without quality [i.e., space identified with the unqualified primary matter] is likely to have occasioned the evil’s being or coming to be … Plato did not overlook the third principle and capacity, which is intermediate between matter and god” (*De an. procr.* 6.1015B τὴν μεταξὺ τῆς ἰδέης καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ τρίτην ἁρχήν καὶ δύναμιν). This third principle acts simultaneously as a “transmitter” of forms (24.1024C διάδιδοσαν ἐκ τῆς ἕκτης εἰκόνας) and as the irrational power stirring a disorderly motion of their “images” within the material substrate.

13 See Lloyd, 92. As the closest analogy to this process Aristotle adduces the curdling of milk by means of rennet or fig-juice, which “sets the bulky portion of milk” (1.20.729a9–21; 2.4.739b21–33), but does not remain in it.
Bibliography


