

Plato's vision: One reality, two worlds, three natures?

Extracts from Plato's *Timaeus*

Introduction

In his dialogue, the *Timaeus*, Plato unfolds his cosmology which is centred on an exploration of *purposes* and *ideas* rather than mechanics. The creation of a manifested universe is not attributed to God (that is to say The One or The Good as the first divinity is called in the Platonic tradition): the creator is called the Demiurgus – the craftsman God – who works with an already existing paradigm¹ and an already existing chaos of matter.

Why does he present it in this way? For Plato The One must be utterly transcendent and possess no qualities, no limits and no activities – for by being above every conceivable characteristic It is able to be the principle of all possible things. By doing nothing, it produces everything. The Platonic tradition explores reality as a series of emanated conditions of existence: starting with the absolute as the most perfect simplicity, each unfolding of the hidden wealth within It, becomes more complex and more conditioned by particularity. Before (and we're really using the word before to mean before *causally*, not *temporally*) the creative act which produces the manifested universe there must be a series of pre-existing states of reality: primarily there must be a series of unities which unfold the possibilities of unity in particular ways; then there must be *being itself*. For without being, there can be no particular kinds of being – in just the same way that one could not produce wooden artifacts without first possessing wood. But when one looks at being – at least in terms of cause and effect – one can see that it must be active (that is to say it can act as a cause) and passive (that is to say it can receive causes): so the two great divisions of Platonism arise within this emanation from the One. On the one hand we have pure causative being (for Plato, *ideas*) and on the other hand pure passive matter: everything that we can perceive and understand must be strung between these two great poles.

To bring these two together requires an *efficient cause* – a maker who just like a cook brings together a recipe and the ingredients. It is this efficient cause that Timaeus calls the Demiurge.

Since the production of a manifested universe is, for Plato, the result of divine activity (or, to be more precise, divine thought) we can still see the overflowing quality which makes for the best kind of production – a causality arising from the essence of the producer, rather than from its external action. It for this reason that the Demiurge, or artificer, is said in the following passage to be without envy, for that which is without envy gives of itself.

The main speaker of the dialogue is a Pythagorean philosopher called Timaeus. This is how he starts his description of the creation:

Extract 1 – Timaeus 29e-30c

Let us declare then on what account the composing artificer constituted generation and the universe. The artificer, indeed, was good; but in that which is good envy never subsists about anything which has being. Hence, as he was entirely void of envy, he was willing to produce all things as much as possible similar to himself. If, therefore, any one receives this most principal cause of generation and the world from wise and prudent men, he will receive him in a manner the most perfect and true. For, as the Divinity was willing that all things should be good, and that as much as possible nothing should be evil; hence, receiving everything visible, and which was not in a state of rest, but moving with confusion and disorder, he reduced it from this wild

¹ A paradigm is a model or pattern upon which a work of art or craftsmanship is based.

inordination into order, considering that such a conduct was by far the best. For it neither ever was lawful, nor is, for the best of causes to produce any other than the most beautiful of effects. In consequence of a reasoning process, therefore, he found that among the things naturally visible there was nothing, the whole of which, if void of intelligence, could ever become more beautiful than the whole of that which is endued with intellect: and at the same time he discovered, that it was impossible for intellect to accede to any being, without the intervention of soul. Hence, as the result of this reasoning, placing intellect in soul and soul in body, he fabricated the universe; that thus it might be a work naturally the most beautiful and the best. In this manner, therefore, according to an assimilative reason, it is necessary to call the world an animal, endued with intellect, and generated through the providence of Divinity.

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Some questions we need to consider about this passage:

Why should similarity to the maker mean that the creation is the best?

Why is it that Plato talks about "wild inordination" existing before the Demiurgic act?

In what way should we ascribe to a creative divinity a "reasoning process"?

What is the relation of intellect, soul and body?

Is the affirmation that the world (that is to say, the manifested universe) is an animal, merely a figure of speech?

Timaeus has already explained the nature of two different conditions of being – the one which is causative in the fullest sense and is unchanging and the other which is receptive of ideas and is therefore changeable, for anything that is material must flow with time and is always *becoming to be* as it moves through its various phases of existence. But whereas the manifested universe is itself material Timaeus then asks whether it is based on an unchanging paradigm. He speaks in these terms:

Extract 2 – Timaeus 27d-29b

In the first place, therefore, as it appears to me, it is necessary to define what that is which is always *real being*, but is without generation; and what that is *which is generated indeed*, or *consists in a state of becoming to be*, but which never *really is*. The former of these indeed is apprehended by *intelligence* in conjunction with *reason*, since it always subsists according to *same*. But the latter is perceived by *opinion* in conjunction with *irrational sense*; since it subsists in a state of generation and corruption, and never truly is. But whatever is generated is necessarily generated from a certain cause. For it is every way impossible that anything should be generated without a cause. When, therefore, an artificer, in the fabrication of any work, looks to that which always subsists according to *same*, and, employing a paradigm of this kind, expresses the idea and power in his work, it is then necessary that the whole of his production should be beautiful. But when he beholds that which is in generation, and uses a generated paradigm, it is alike necessary that his work should be far from beautiful. . . .

Again: this is to be considered concerning the Demiurge, I mean, to what kind of paradigm he looked towards as he fabricated the world - whether towards an exemplar, subsisting according to that which is always the same, and similarly affected, or towards that which is generated. But, indeed, if this world is beautiful, and its artificer good, it is evident that he looked towards an eternal exemplar in its fabrication. But if the world be far from beautiful, which it is not lawful to assert, he necessarily beheld a generated instead of an eternal exemplar. But it is perfectly evident that he regarded an eternal paradigm. For the world is the most beautiful of generated natures, and its artificer the best of causes. But, being thus generated, it is fabricated according

to that which is comprehensible by reason and intelligence, and which subsists in an abiding sameness of being. And from hence it is perfectly necessary that this world should be the resemblance of something.

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Again some pressing questions arise from this passage:

What is the nature of real being – why is it called real, and does that mean that changeable things are unreal?

What is the difference between intelligence and reason on the one hand, and opinion and irrational sense on the other?

Why does an immutable paradigm produce beautiful things, while a mutable one something "far from beautiful"?

Part of the Demiurgic act, it seems, allows the emergence of things which are in a state of change, moving from one condition to another, moment by moment. This movement is, as regards manifestation, a mark of a living thing, and is entirely dependent upon the reality of time – for no change is possible without the passing of time. Here Timaeus presents the Demiurgic production of time as a necessary consequence of basing his production on a paradigm which is not only eternal but also alive.

Extract 3 – Timaeus 37c

But when the generating father understood that this generated resemblance of the eternal Gods moved and lived, he was delighted with his work, and in consequence of this delight considered how he might fabricate it still more similar to its exemplar. Hence, as that is an eternal animal, he endeavoured to render this universe such, to the utmost of his ability. The nature indeed of the animal its paradigm is eternal, and this it is impossible to adapt perfectly to a generated effect. Hence he determined by a dianoetic energy to produce a certain movable image of eternity: and thus, while he was adorning and distributing the universe, he at the same time formed an eternal image flowing according to number, of eternity abiding in one; and which receives from us the appellation of time.

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Since everything which is manifested has arisen from the unmanifested eternal world and each characteristic which is given expression 'here' was originally held 'there' with eternal beings, Timaeus calls this universe a "resemblance of the eternal Gods."

So a final few questions:

Why would the Demiurge produce a temporal 'living animal' rather than another eternal one?

What are the similarities between eternity and time, and what is the difference?

Why does he say that this image of eternity flow *according to number*? And why *abiding in one*?

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Finally, we should think about the unity holding the whole of reality together: the Timaeus is a way of exploring how the manifested and temporal universe is an expression of the unmanifested and eternal principles. The dialogue goes to great lengths to avow that there is nothing outside the production of the Demiurge and that it is one whole – "he fabricated the universe one whole, composed from all wholes, perfect, undecaying, and without disease."

Extract 4 – Timaeus

He accurately polished the external circumference of the spherical world, and rendered it perfectly smooth. Nor was the addition of eyes requisite to the universe; for nothing visible remained external to itself. Nor were ears necessary; as there was nothing externally audible. Nor was the universe invested with surrounding air, that it might be indigent of respiration. Nor, again, was it in want of any organ through which it might receive nutriment into itself, and discharge it when concocted: for there was no possibility that any thing could either accede to or depart from its nature, since there was nothing through which such changes could be produced. For, indeed, the universe affords nutriment to itself through its own consumption; and, being artificially fabricated, suffers and acts all things in itself, and from its own peculiar operations. For its composing artificer considered that it would be much more excellent if sufficient to itself, than if indigent of foreign supplies. But he neither thought that hands were necessary to the world, as there was nothing for it either to receive or reject; nor yet feet, nor any other members which are subservient to progression and rest. For from among the seven species of local motion he selected one, which principally subsists about intellect and intelligence, and assigned it to the world as properly allied to its surrounding body.

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This chosen motion is a circular one – so that the manifested universe is considered as in motion but not moving from one place to another.

The criterion upon which the Demiurge makes his decisions about the created world is that of goodness – every characteristic of the manifested world is there because it is the best possible. What overarches both the eternal world of "real being" and the temporal world of generation is the Good – the former produces without envy because that is good, the latter is as it is and receptive of the ordering of the Demiurge because that too is good. We have, then, one reality, made up of two worlds and three primary natures which Plotinus will call the three hypostases – the One, Intellect and Soul. Intellect represents the eternal and unmoving nature, soul the temporal and moving nature and the One (or, as it is sometimes called, the Good) is the unifying nature that makes all thing one. This First Principle is neither temporal nor eternal – and being without conditions of any kind it allows all conditions to be part of one reality.