

Plato's Cosmic Ecology

Some affirmations from the Timaeus

Plato's usual exploration of important philosophical concepts is through a dialogue form which allows his reader to follow various questions and their possible answers in a way which leaves us with a better understanding of the issues but still free to come to our own conclusions. Even if we don't agree with the answers Plato puts in the mouths of the characters of his dialogues, we gain from listening, so to speak, to their thoughts – we see the "working out" of the problems investigated, in just the same way as our maths teachers wanted to see not just our answers but the way in which we reached them in our exams. The *Timaeus* is unusual inasmuch as it is something of a departure from the "question and answer" arguments of most other dialogues, so that although it is still nominally a dialogue, it is really a set of linked monologues from its main characters, Socrates, Critias and Timaeus – and in fact the last speaker, Timaeus, holds forth virtually uninterrupted for the about nine tenths of the entire work.

Why does Plato make such a radical change in his presentation? Most of his dialogues are concerned with ethical questions – or, perhaps one should say a single ethical question: *how should we live?* As such it is important that the dialogue form draws us in as active participants in the search for that wisdom which is necessary for the living of the good life. But the *Timaeus* is not – at least not directly – ethical: it is an attempt to lay before us a vision of the manifested world in which our ethical life is lived. Timaeus paints the scenery of the play in which humanity, individually and collectively, is an intrinsic part of the cast. He calls his description of the world and its creation an "*eikós muthos*" a "story of likeness" or a "likely story" – and a story is better told by a single narrator than by a series of arguments. But having said that the work is not itself an ethical one perhaps we should accept that, since it provides the frame in which our ethics are unfolded, its aim is still fundamentally an attempt to underpin our ethical thinking with the best possible foundation. Each one of us is a part of a greater whole, and our particular nature and purpose is best understood within the context of the nature and purpose of the universal whole: this, I think, is Plato's aim in writing the *Timaeus*.

At the beginning of his speech Timaeus makes the usual Platonic distinction between things which are eternal – things which *are* – and those that are temporal – things which *are in process*. The former being perceived by intelligence, the latter by sense. He also points out the necessity for those things which are in process to be the result of some suitable cause:

"Now then, in my opinion, one must first distinguish the following. What is it that *always is* and *has no becoming*; and what is it that *comes to be* and *never is*? Now the one is grasped by intellection accompanied by a rational account, since it's always in the same condition; but the other in its turn is opined by opinion accompanied by irrational sensation, since it comes to be and perishes and never genuinely is. Again, everything that comes to be, of necessity comes to be by some cause; for apart from a cause, it's impossible for anything to have a coming to be." (28a)

Another important insight of the Platonic tradition is the question of what constitutes sufficient causality: everything has many causes but there are three kinds of causes which are considered to be primary: the efficient, the paradigm, and the final – in simple terms, the maker, the model upon which something is based, and the purpose for which a thing is brought into existence. Since Timaeus is going to talk about the whole manifested cosmos as one entity, he must first establish to which of the two categories it belongs – and since the physical universe is clearly constantly in a process of becoming (and is perceptible through the senses), it is put into the second of the two categories. But, he claims, the model upon which it's based should be put into the first category – for when something is based on a model which itself is in the process of change the resulting production will be less than beautiful, but "the cosmos is the most beautiful of things born and its craftsman the best of causes. Now since that's how it has come to be, then it has been crafted with reference to that which is grasped by reason and prudence and is in a self-same condition."

To state things as clearly as possible, the manifested universe has these three primary causes according to Timaeus and this Platonic scheme of causation:

The "efficient" (or "producing") cause is called the *craftsman*, or *Demiurge* – whose nature is eternally creative and intellectual.

The paradigmatic cause is called *autozoon* or *animal itself* – a single, living, all-encompassing and eternal model.

The final cause is the Good – and since this is the most powerful of causes, its nature pervades the other two causes. The universe exists for the sake of the good, and its purpose is to exhibit in physical form the absolute good, as far as that is possible.

First affirmation: the entire universe is intelligent and alive

** 29e-30d **

Now let us say through what cause the maker constructed *becoming* and this universe. Good was he, and in one who is good there never arises about anything whatsoever any [withholding] envy; and so, being free of this, he willed that all

things should come to resemble himself as much as possible. That this above all is the lordliest principle of becoming and cosmos one must receive, and correctly so, from prudent men. For since he wanted all things to be good and, to the best of his power, nothing to be evil, the god thus took over all that was visible, and, since it did not keep its peace but moved unmusically and without order, he brought it into order from disorder, since he regarded the former to be in all ways better than the latter. And it was not right – nor is it right – for him who is best to do anything except that which is most beautiful; so, once he did some calculating, he discovered that of all things visible by nature, nothing unintelligent will ever be a more beautiful work, comparing wholes with wholes, than what has intellect; and again, that it's impossible for intellect apart from soul to become present in anything. Through this calculation, then, by constructing intellect within soul and soul within body, he joined together the all so that he had fashioned a work that would be most beautiful and best in accordance with nature. So then, in this way, in keeping with the likely account, *it must be said that this cosmos here in truth was born an animal having soul and intellect* through the forethought of the god.

Again, with this beginning, we must say what comes next in order to these things: in similarity to which of the animals the constructor constructed it. Now we shall not count as worthy any of those that by nature have the form of part – for nothing that's like the incomplete would ever become beautiful – but let us set down the following about the cosmos. Among all animals, it's the one most similar to that of which the others, individually and according to kind, are parts. For that one, having embraced all the intelligible Animals, holds them within itself, just as this cosmos holds and embraces us and all the other nurslings constructed as visible. For since the god wanted to make it as similar as possible to the most beautiful of things intelligible and in all ways complete, he constructed it as an animal visible and one, holding within itself all those animals that are akin to it according to nature.

Second affirmation: the universe is single, unique and self-sufficient – a "god".

** 34a-b **

So the god who exists for ever [i.e. the Demiurge] took thought for the god that was to be [i.e. the manifested universe], and for all these reasons he made for it a body that was smooth, uniform, equal in all directions from its centre, and a complete totality, made up of bodies that were also complete totalities. And once he had set in the centre a soul, which he then stretched throughout the body and with which he also coated the outside, he set the body spinning and made it a single, unique universe, capable, thanks to its perfection, of keeping its own company, of needing nothing and no one else, since it was enough for it that it had familiarity and affinity with itself. This, then, was how he created it to be a blessed god.

Third affirmation: we recover our true selves by observing, and aligning ourselves with, the workings of the cosmos.

** 90b-d **

When a man is caught up in his appetites or his ambitions and devotes all his energies to them, the mental processes that go on inside him are bound to be restricted entirely to mortal beliefs, and he himself is bound to be completely and utterly as mortal as a man can be, since that is the part of himself that he has reinforced. But anyone who has devoted himself to learning and has genuinely applied his intelligence – which is to say, anyone who has primarily exercised his intellect – cannot fail to attain immortal, divine wisdom, if the truth should come within his grasp. He achieves the full measure of immortality that is possible for a human being, and because he always takes care of the divine part of himself and maintains the orderly beauty of his daemon,¹ he is bound to be exceptionally blessed. But there is only one way that anyone can take care of anything, and that is by giving it food and exercise that is congenial to it.² So, since the movements that are naturally akin to our divine part are the thoughts and revolutions of the universe, these are what each of us should be guided by as we attempt to reverse the corruption of the circuits in our heads, that happened around the time of our birth, by studying the harmonies and revolutions of the universe. In this way, we will restore our nature to its original condition by assimilating our intellect to what it is studying and, with such a likeness, we will achieve our goal : to live, now and in the future, the best life that the gods have placed within human reach.

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Does this view of a divine, intelligent and living cosmos, require a re-evaluation of our relation to the natural world? Does it cause us to question the assumption that we should "conquer" it and shape it in our own image? What does the study of the harmonies and revolutions of the Cosmos entail – and is this a matter of mere mental abstraction, or does the alignment take place through the life that we live? These are some of the issues we might like to consider during our evening.

¹ The Platonic tradition holds that the self – that is to say the soul that descends into a physical body, and which thinks, feels, chooses and directs the life – is accompanied by a daemon which is considered to be somewhat like a guardian angel and which provides a connection between the self and the divine powers which transcend the manifested world: it is the daemon who continually provides the impulse within the soul to express the beauty which resides in the eternal realm but which underpins the *Cosmos* (a word which literally means "ordered beauty").

² The food which nourishes the intellectual part is, according to the *Republic* (401d) rhythm and harmony: "Rhythm and harmony permeate the innermost element of the soul, affect it more powerfully than anything else, and bring it grace, such an education makes one graceful . . . he [who is thus educated] will be pleased by fine things, take them into his soul and through being nourished by them, become fine and good."