

Timaeus - creation and causation

Many thinkers of our time have a relatively straightforward view of creation as understood by Plato: essentially it is seen as the result of an intellectual God, the Demiurge, producing an ordered universe as a manifestation of eternal ideas held in his mind. Further, that this is both a single all-encompassing act when the cosmos is considered as one living whole, and as a multiple act each time we consider every intellectual idea casting downward its instantiations: the idea of justice producing instances of justice, the idea of horse producing instances of horses, the idea of equal producing things approximating to equality. The justification of this understanding of Platonic creation is largely based on the *Timaeus*, but perhaps this is too much of a simplification. It's worth having a closer look at what is said in that dialogue.

Firstly, Timaeus makes a distinction between an order of things generated and an order of things which are eternal paradigms of those generated things:

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.

What follows this careful ontological and epistemological definition are three assertions: that the model upon which the cosmos is based is eternal; that the cosmos itself is a generated whole bound by time; and that the efficient producer creates by contemplating that eternal paradigm.

We might note that the three primary causes – the final, the paradigmatic, and the efficient – are completed by the description of the Demiurge (the efficient cause) as being “good” and therefore bring into play the final cause “for the sake of which” all things are brought into being: the end of all beings being goodness.

“But if the world is beautiful, and its artificer good, it is evident that he looked towards some 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” (28c)

But the Demiurge is not the absolute beginning insofar as he works with a certain kind of pre-existence:

“For, as the Divinity was willing that all things should be good, and that as much as possible nothing should be evil; hence, receiving every thing visible, and which was not in a state of

rest, but moving with confusion and disorder, he reduced it from this wild inordination into order, considering that such a conduct was by far the best.” (30a)

The activity of the Demiurge (the word originally meant *craftsman*) is, therefore, to bring order and arrangement to something. But later in the dialogue, Timaeus backtracks and corrects the impression that he might have given, that the act of creation only requires an eternal paradigm and a generated manifestation. He then begins by saying:

“But it is necessary that the beginning of our present disputation should receive a more ample division than the former one. For then we made a distribution into two species: but now a third sort must be added. In the former disputation two species were sufficient; one of which was established as the form of an exemplar, intelligible and always subsisting according to *same*; but the other was nothing more than the imitation of the paradigm, generated and visible. But we did not then distribute a third, because we considered these two as sufficient.” (48e)

What is this *third kind*?

“Shall we say that it is in an eminent degree the receptacle, and as it were nurse, of all generation? (49a)

“For it never departs from its own proper power, but perpetually receives all things; and never contracts any form in any respect similar to any one of the intromitted forms. It lies indeed in subjection to the forming power of every nature, becoming agitated and figured through the supernally intromitted forms: and through these it exhibits a different appearance at different times. But the forms which enter and depart from this receptacle are the imitations of perpetually true beings; and are figured by them in a manner wonderful and difficult to describe, as we shall afterwards relate. At present, however, it is necessary to consider three sorts of things: one, that which is generated; another, that in which it is generated; and the third, that from which the generated nature derives its similitude. But it is proper to assimilate that which receives to a mother; that from whence it receives to a father; and the nature situated between these to an offspring.” (50b-d)

In fact, Plato has Timaeus discourse for some while before (at 52b) he gives this third kind a name, *chōra*, which translators take as ‘place’ or even ‘space.’ It is a formless receptacle which is capable of receiving all forms.

Very early in the speech of Timaeus, he makes this statement concerning the Demiurge:

“To discover, therefore, the *artificer* and *father* of the universe is indeed difficult; and when found it is impossible to reveal him through the ministry of discourse to all men.” (28c)

The same naming takes place when the moment comes to bring into being a creature which is immortal soul with a temporal binding of body, the latter being supplied by the “junior Gods” to whom the Demiurge says:

“Gods of Gods, of whom I am the demiurgus and father . . .” (41a)

This double relation of *maker* and *father* requires some attention, and Proclus in his various writings does exactly that.

The relation between a paternal cause and the demiurgic one is discussed in Proclus' *Theology of Plato*, V, 12:

"It is necessary therefore that the whole demiurgic principles should pertain to this intellect, that all the demiurgic Gods should proceed from this one third father,¹ and

¹ That is to say Zeus, the Demiurge or “Maker and Father”, is the third of the intellectual fathers – the triad Kronos, Rhea, Zeus.

that this should be the demiurgus of wholes. For as the first paradigms co-subsist in intelligible intellect, and in the third triad and the first father [Animal Itself, or Phanes], so likewise we must place the first demiurgic monad in intellectual intellect, and the third father of the intellectual Gods [Zeus]. For on this account also the demiurgic is conjoined with the paradigmatic cause, according to the analogy which each is allotted among the fathers; one indeed in intelligibles, but the other in intellectuals. For one is the boundary of the intelligible, but the other of the intellectual order."

The demiurgic nature of Zeus is paternal, for he is an intellectual father, but Proclus makes a distinction between a demiurgic cause and a paternal cause – for demiurgic activity works on what already exists in some way, but paternal production is from the very essence of the causal self. For this reason he outlines a descending order from the first intelligible triad, through the third intelligible triad, onwards through Zeus, and coming to its end in the demiurgic Gods who rule partial natures. So it is that we can see this descending scale in these terms:

Father The First Intelligible Triad (Orphic "Primordial Egg") – the final cause

Father and maker .. The Third Intelligible Triad (Orphic "Phanes") – the formal cause

Maker and Father .. Zeus – the effective cause

Maker Hephaestus in particular, or the partial demiurgic gods generally –
concauses (or those arising within the movements of materiality)

He continues:

"The paternal peculiarity, therefore, originates supernally from the first intelligible triad;² but the fabricative first presents itself to the view in the third triad. For that which generates all forms, and adorns all things with forms is the third triad of intelligibles. For there, as we have said, all-perfect animal subsists, which is comprehensive of the first and intelligible paradigms. Here therefore, the effective also or fabricative at the same time subsists. For animal itself constitutes the Gods, and produces the forms of all beings. Hence it is allotted the paternal peculiarity, according to the divine cause; but according to the formal cause, it unfolds into light the effective principle of wholes.

But again, on the contrary, the effective and at the same time paternal peculiarity, is allotted its hypostasis in the demiurgic monad. Hence also the Demiurgus of wholes is the hypostatic cause of Gods. In a particular manner however, he fabricates the world, energising with forms and demiurgic reasons. For he constitutes intellect, souls and bodies, adorning all things with forms, some indeed with first, others with middle, and others with last forms.

² This seems quite explicit – the simply Father is the first intelligible triad (the One Being, of which he writes “it is necessary that the multitude of all beings, whether they are contraries or not, should be suspended from the one being, [i.e. from being characterized by the one;] but that the one being itself should be suspended from The One.” II, 4 - 34.15). However it is possible to understand the Father as the Bound – the super-essential principle which always partners the Infinite, and which is therefore the first of any possible Father-Mother relationship: see *Commentary on the Timaeus*, 3, 208, 30: “Father is Ether [Bound] that first proceeds from the One...” Perhaps we should keep an open mind about this, considering how close these two (I mean the Bound, and the One Being) are: the One Being is, after all, very clearly the primary ontological expression of the Bound, the first of the first beings brought forth by the dominion of the Bound in the mixture of (previously super-essential) bound and the infinite.

Do you not see, therefore, how the end of intelligibles indeed, was paternal and at the same time effective; but the end of intellectuals is effective and at the same time paternal. There however, the paternal peculiarity is more predominant; but here the effective. For in both indeed, both causes pre-exist; nevertheless in the paradigm [i.e. in animal itself] the paternal is more prevalent, but in the demiurgus the effective. For the former produces by his very being; but the latter by energizing. And in the former indeed, fabrication [or effective energy] is essential; but in the latter essence is effective. Forms also are with both; but in the former intelligibly, and in the latter intellectually.

From these things therefore, it is evident, that the demiurgic cause subsists analogous to the paradigmatic cause; and that it has the same order with respect to intellectuals,³ as that has with respect to intelligibles. And on this account Timaeus also says that the demiurgus of wholes was extended to that paradigm.⁴

We must consider causal power as a doubled character - it proceeds downward in measured steps but also throws its illumination to the furthest point possible. The Good passes on its character to being, and from being to life, life to intellect, intellect to soul, etc. But it also illumines things beyond the reach of each of these descending principles so that the lowest is also simply the product of the Good. *The Elements of Theology* states:

71 *All things which among principal causes possess a more total and higher order in their effects, according to the illuminations proceeding from them, become in a certain respect subjects [Dodds: “a kind of substratum”] to the communications of more partial causes.⁵ And the illuminations indeed, from higher causes, receive the progressions from secondary causes; but the latter are established in the former. And thus some participations precede others, and some representations extend after others, beginning from on high, to the same subject, more total causes having a prior energy, but such as are more partial, supplying their participants with their communications, posterior to the energies of more total causes.*

For if more causal natures energize prior to such as are secondary on account of exuberance of power, and are present with those that have a more imperfect aptitude, and illuminate them also; but things more subordinate, and which are second in order, are supplied from such as are more causal, - it is evident that the illuminations of superior natures antecedently comprehend that which participates of both these, and give stability to the communications of things subordinate. But these illuminations of superior causes, employ the resemblances of subordinate natures as foundations, and operate on that which participates of them, the superior causes themselves having a prior energy.

³ That is to say that the intelligible paradigm is the third of the intelligible triad (the One Being, Eternity, Animal Itself) and the Demiurge is the third of the intellectual triad (Kronos, Rhea, Zeus).

⁴ In Orphic mythology the same relationship is presented as Zeus swallowing Phanes so that everything which Phanes, the first ruler of the universe, held within the Cavern of Night occultly, was then “in the belly of Zeus” and sprang forth from him anew – making all manifest in the temporal universe.

⁵ Thus, for example, the higher and more universal idea of *animal* provides the substratum upon which the lower and more particular idea *zebra* imposes itself. “Animal-ness” with its wide range of possibilities becomes, in this case, subject to the limitations imposed by “zebra-ness.”

72. *All things which in their participants have the relation of a subject, proceed from more perfect and total causes.*

For the causes of a great number of effects, are more powerful and total, and are nearer to *the one* than the causes of fewer effects. But the natures which give subsistence to such things as are antecedently the subjects of others, are among causes the sources of a greater number of effects.

Corollary

From hence it is evident why matter which derives its subsistence from *the one*, is of itself destitute of form. And why body, though it participates of being, is of itself without the participation of soul. For matter being the subject of all things, proceeds from the cause of all.⁶ But body being the subject of animation, derives its subsistence from that which is more total than soul, and participates after a certain manner of being.

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In the great scheme of things, then, the highest cause provides the most universal substratum (whether we call this chora or prime matter); after this, the next cause provides a kind of half-formed substratum lying over the top of the base, and is the disordered pre-existing stuff upon which the third cause, the Demiurge, imposes an arrangement recognizable by intellectual perception. We can see why Proclus sees participation as arising from three causes - the overarching Good, the good in the Form, and the good in the desiring of *aptly* receptive natures.

This might also be seen in the *Symposium* (203b) where Penia (Poverty) desires a child from Poros (Wealth) and, is said to “artfully lie down beside him” in the Garden of Zeus. The seduction, then, is of Poros by Penia, not the other way round.

⁶ By matter proceeding from the cause of all, nothing more is meant than that it depends entirely on the first cause for its shadowy and unreal subsistence: for as the emanations of causes are extended in proportion to their eminence, hence the processions of the one extend beyond those of every other cause, and even leave faint traces of their illuminations in the dark receptacle of matter. TT