

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 “*eikōs mythos*” 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:

“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.” (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 **

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 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.

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 “happy god”.

** 34a-b **

When, therefore, that God who is a perpetually reasoning divinity cogitated about the God who was destined to subsist at some certain period of time, he produced his body smooth and equable; and every way from the middle even and whole, and perfect from the composition of perfect bodies. But, placing soul in the middle of the world, he extended it through the whole; and besides this, he externally invested the body of the universe with soul; and, causing circle to revolve in a circle, established the world one single, solitary nature, able through virtue to converse with itself, indigent of nothing external, and sufficiently known and friendly to itself. And on all these accounts he rendered the universe a happy God.

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

** 90b-d **

In him, therefore, who vehemently labours to satisfy the cravings of desire and ambition, all the conceptions of his soul must be necessarily mortal; and himself as much as possible must become entirely mortal, since he leaves nothing unaccomplished which tends to increase his perishable part. But it is necessary that he who is sedulously employed in the acquisition of knowledge, who is anxious to acquire the wisdom of truth, and who employs his most vigorous exertions in this one pursuit; - it is perfectly necessary that such a one, if he touches on the truth, should be endued with wisdom about immortal and divine concerns; and that he should participate of immortality, as far as human nature permits, without leaving any part of it behind. And besides, as such a one always cultivates that which is divine, and has a daemon most excellently adorned residing in his essence,¹ he must be happy in the most eminent degree. The culture of all the parts is indeed entirely one, and consists in assigning proper nutriment and motion to each.² But the motions which are allied to the divine part of our nature are the dianoëtic energies and circulations of the universe. These, therefore, each of us ought to pursue; restoring in such a manner those revolutions in our head (which have been corrupted by our wanderings about generation), through diligently considering the harmonies and circulations of the universe, that the intellective power may become assimilated to the object of intelligence, according to its ancient nature. For, when thus assimilated, we shall obtain the end of the best life proposed by the Gods to men, both at present and in all the future circulations of time.

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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.”