

## BEING AND TIME IN PLATO'S *TIMAEUS*

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In the *Timaeus*, Plato presents us with his controversial account of the creation of the world in which the demiurge, the divine craftsman, brings the universe into being. While a superficial reading of this account suggests that the cosmos has a beginning in time, a deeper consideration of the text makes this position increasingly difficult to maintain. Thus, following Proclus and other commentators, I would like to argue that Plato's account of creation in the *Timaeus* is not to be understood in literal, temporal terms but rather in a more subtle, ontological sense. Rather than coming to be at some point in time, the world is in fact eternal, existing in a state of beginningless becoming.

Given the explicit connection Plato draws between the *Timaeus* and the *Republic*,<sup>1</sup> I would like to begin with some reflections concerning the relationship between these two dialogues. It is perhaps problematic to assume that what Timaeus proposes in his speech must be in conformity with what Socrates presents in the *Republic*. It is an open question, as Cooper points out in his introduction to the dialogue, as to what extent Timaeus' account is a true representation of Plato's own views on the nature of reality. How much reflects Plato's own philosophical convictions, and how much belongs to Timaeus' rhetorical embellishments?<sup>2</sup> Still, while the rhetorical as well as the "likely"<sup>3</sup> nature of Timaeus' story may explain certain inconsistencies, one has every reason to believe that the fundamental principles of Plato's philosophy remain more or less intact. The fact that Plato presents the *Timaeus* as a *complementary* account, providing a more dynamic, living depiction of the abstract argument of the *Republic*, indicates that we are justified in joining what we learn in the *Republic* to what we find in the *Timaeus*.<sup>4</sup>

If it is true that Timaeus' speech is to somehow supplement or fill out the account given by Socrates in the *Republic*, then keeping the *Republic* constantly in mind is crucial for a proper interpretation of the *Timaeus*. Both dialogues complement each other; separately, each is lacking something. Not only is this true of the *Republic*, as Socrates makes clear<sup>5</sup>, it is equally true of the *Timaeus*. In seeking to bring the *Republic* to life, the *Timaeus* account sacrifices a certain philosophical precision. The *Timaeus* is a "likely story" told from the perspective of becoming, of sensation and opinion. Thus, while the *Republic* errs on the side of intellectual abstraction, the *Timaeus* errs in its emphasis upon sensible particulars. Taken separately from the *Republic*, the poetic language of the *Timaeus* can be misleading. This is especially so in the discussion of being and becoming,

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<sup>1</sup> See *Timaeus* 17a-19a where Socrates begins by briefly summarizing the argument of the *Republic* .

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Complete Works, Timaeus*, ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Co., 1997 p.1225

<sup>3</sup> See *Timaeus* 29b-d

<sup>4</sup> See *Timaeus* 19b-d

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

the proper understanding of which is important for answering the question as to whether, according to Plato, the world is eternal or has a beginning in time.

Generally speaking, reading the *Timaeus* in isolation from the *Republic* gives the misleading impression that there are two wholly separate, independent levels of reality: the world of being and the world of becoming. One is the higher eternal world of the Forms, and the other is the lower temporal world of images. The appearance of the craftsman as a kind of creator deity, who fashions the lower world upon the pattern of the higher, furthers the sense of ontological as well as temporal separation between the two worlds. Thus, a superficial reading of the *Timaeus* account of creation suggests that while the spiritual world of being is eternal, the material world of becoming has a definite beginning in time. However, if one keeps in mind the *Republic* account of being and becoming this perspective becomes problematic.

In the *Republic*, the Sun, Line and Cave analogies with their graded levels of being and knowing give the strong impression that the two seemingly separate levels of reality are in fact to be understood as graded apprehensions of a *single* reality, as ascending modes of knowing and being in which knower and known are increasingly unified. Being and becoming with their corresponding modes of knowing are ultimately, to use Pierre Hadot's celebrated phrase, levels of the self. Socrates gives evidence of the subjective, epistemological aspect of reality in the Sun analogy. He states: "when the [soul] focuses on something illuminated by truth and what is, it understands, knows, and apparently possesses understanding, but when it focuses on what is mixed with obscurity, on what comes to be and passes away, it opines and is dimmed" (*Republic*, VI. 508d). The intimate relationship between knower and known is fundamental to the intellectual ascent in the Line and Cave analogies. Just as the different modes of knowing belong to a single subject, so the corresponding modes of being belong to a single reality. Thus, being and becoming are not two separate worlds, but rather the apprehension of a single reality from two different perspectives. The *Republic* account, in which being and becoming are ultimately higher and lower modes of apprehending the world, is difficult to reconcile with a literal reading of *Timaeus'* account of the world as having a temporal beginning. This would require that being, which corresponds to the upper half of the Line and Cave analogies, would somehow have had to exist prior to becoming, which corresponds to the lower half. While being may be *ontologically* prior to becoming, there is no indication that it is prior in time. The introduction of temporal priority creates an ontological and epistemological rift wholly alien to the *Republic* account of reality. Thus, if we take Socrates at his word and accept that the *Republic* and *Timaeus* are closely connected, with the latter not deviating from but rather embellishing the former, then the notion that the world has a temporal beginning cannot be taken literally. What, then, is the point of *Timaeus'* account of creation? Why does he seem to insist that the world does have a temporal beginning?

Leaving the *Republic* aside for the moment, I would like to investigate what *Timaeus* actually says at the beginning of his account of the creation of the world. The first reference to the question of whether the world is eternal or has a temporal beginning is found in *Timaeus'* invocation to the gods prior to embarking upon his exposition. "In our

case” he begins, “we are about to make speeches about the universe – whether it has an origin *or even if it does not* – and so if we are not to go completely astray we have no choice but to call upon the gods and goddesses” (*Timaeus*, 27c, emphasis added). This initial reference, while presenting the origin of the world as an open question, suggests that it may be unoriginated. The second reference to time follows immediately after the invocation. Timaeus begins by laying out a distinction fundamental to his initial account of the cosmos. “As I see it”, he says, “we must begin by making the following distinction: What is *that which always is* and has no becoming, and what is *that which [always] becomes* but never is?” (28a). This statement, which lays out the important ontological distinction between unchanging being and changeable becoming, suggests that the world of becoming has no origin but rather exists in a perpetual state of coming to be and passing away. The third and final statement Timaeus makes at the beginning of his account seems to deliberately contradict the second. Concerning the world, he asks, “Has it always existed? Was there no origin from which it came to be? Or did it come to be and take its start from some origin?” (28c). His reply is simple and seemingly straightforward: “It has come to be” (*ibid*).

Thus, we have three statements with respect to whether the world has a beginning in time or not. The first suggests that the world *may* be eternal; the second affirms this, while the third denies it – asserting instead that the world is originated in time. Leaving aside the first, how do we go about reconciling the second and third statements which appear to be in direct opposition to each other? Which one is to be accepted as the authoritative utterance, the final word on the question of time and eternity? One rather inelegant solution is simply to relegate the Greek *aei* to a footnote, as Cooper does, so that the statement reads: “what is *that which becomes* but never is?”<sup>6</sup> By omitting the “always” from the second half of the statement, the suggestion of perpetual becoming is sanitized, making it easier to adopt the third statement as authoritative, namely, that the world has a beginning in time. Needless to say, this little piece of editorial sleight of hand is hardly a satisfying solution. Instead, we need to look deeper.

Timaeus presents his account of creation in terms which, if we accept the third statement literally, suggests that the world has a temporal origin. This, however, is problematic for at least two reasons: (1) it introduces an awkward temporal division which is incompatible with the *Republic* account of reality and (2) it contradicts Timaeus’ second statement which suggests that the world is in a perpetual state of becoming (28a). Thus, I would like to argue that, while couched in historically suggestive terms, Timaeus’ account is in fact less concerned with time than it is with ontology.<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of his account Timaeus clearly distinguishes two levels of existence: being and becoming. While the former is unchanging and grasped by understanding founded upon reason, the latter is in a continual state of becoming and is grasped by opinion founded upon sensation (28a). Having established this vital ontological and epistemological distinction, Timaeus then

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<sup>6</sup> *Timaeus*, 28a; Cooper, *Complete Works*, p.1234, footnote 7

<sup>7</sup> As Proclus and other ancient and contemporary commentators suggest (Cornford, Frances MacDonald, *Plato’s Cosmology*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1952, p. 26).

needs to answer an important question: which level of existence does the world belong to, being or becoming? When Timaeus asks (at 28c) whether the world has always existed or if it has come to be, he is asking an ontological question; namely, does the world belong to the level of being or becoming? The answer is that “it has come to be” (28c). That is to say, the world belongs to the level of becoming. This is confirmed by the fact that the world is a visible and tangible body available to sense perception and grasped by opinion. As such, the world belongs to the class of “things that come to be, things that are begotten” (28c). The main point of the discussion is less about positing a temporal beginning to the world than it is about establishing its ontological status.

This, however, raises an important question: If the real point of Timaeus’ account of creation is ontological, why does he present his account in such a way as to suggest that the world has a beginning in time? Or does he? As Cornford points out, one source of the controversy as to whether or not Timaeus posits a temporal beginning to the world lies in the ambiguity of the word “becoming” (Cornford, 24). Becoming (*genesis, gignesthai*) can be understood in two ways: (1) as referring to something that comes into existence at some point in time as a result of a natural process of generation or due to the work of an artisan or (2) as referring to something that is in a process of change, an event which is ongoing. While the process of becoming is characterized by things continually coming to be and passing away, the process itself “can be conceived of as going on perpetually, without beginning or end” (25). While both of the above senses of the word are suggested by Timaeus’ account, adopting the second sense enables us to resolve the two seemingly opposed statements within the *Timaeus* while simultaneously reconciling it with the *Republic*. Thus, the answer as to why Timaeus presents his ontological account in temporal terms is, quite simply, that he doesn’t.

There is one major obstacle, however, which stands in the way of this conclusion; namely, the craftsman. Timaeus informs us that “everything that comes to be must of necessity come to be by the agency of some cause” (*Timaeus*, 28a). Also, as Cornford points out, the two senses of the word “becoming” imply two distinct kinds of causes. The first sense of becoming, in which something comes to be in time, requires the “notion of a cause imaged as a father who begets his offspring, or as a maker who fashions his product out of his materials” (24). The second sense of becoming requires a different image – the image of a creator or craftsman being incompatible with the conception of a beginningless and endless process of becoming. Instead, what is required is the idea of a cause which “can sustain the process and keep it going endlessly” (25); that is, some kind of ideal or end eternally exercising a force of attraction. While this second notion of causality accords well with our ahistorical reading of the *Timaeus*, it is unfortunately the first notion of causality, that of a craftsman who creates the world in time, which in fact serves as the central image of the dialogue.

The only way open to us is to argue for an allegorical interpretation of the craftsman. Timaeus’ account is, after all, a “likely story”. In order to expound the nature of the world of becoming, Timaeus employs the language and imagery of that world – a world characterized by origination and dissolution, by time and causality. I argued above that what the opening account of the *Timaeus* is really interested in is not whether the world is

eternal or has a beginning in time, but rather its ontological status. Similarly, the image of the craftsman is not to be understood literally as a creator deity who fashions the world in time. Instead, he must be understood allegorically. The craftsman is a personification of Reason, of the living Intelligence which pervades, informs, and eternally sustains the world of becoming. The image of the craftsman, along with the Living Thing (30c), breathes life into the intelligible world, the static and abstract Forms of the *Republic*. Socrates had requested a dynamic, animated account of the ideal city. The fulfillment of this request begins with Timaeus' account of the cosmos. Timaeus accomplishes this by drawing upon the living language of becoming, weaving a philosophical allegory in the form of a creation myth.

The main point of the craftsman is to drive home the notion that the world is not merely the product of blind necessity, but is governed by reason and intelligence. This is the meaning of the extremely odd question: "Which of the two models did the maker use when he fashioned [the world]? Was it the one that does not change and stays the same, or the one that has come to be?" (29a). The answer, of course, is that he chose the eternal model of the Forms. That there could be a model for becoming is a contradiction in terms, and therefore must be regarded as rhetorical. What Timaeus is *really* asking is this: is the world informed by reason, ontologically dependent upon the intelligible world of being, or is it modeled upon becoming, which is to say, dependent upon itself as a self-caused entity? To be modeled or dependent upon itself is to say that the world is not governed by reason but comes to be due to random necessity. The image of a craftsman who molds the world according to the model of being is meant to convey, in poetic fashion, that the world is indeed an ordered whole, dependent upon the intelligible world of being, permeated by reason. The evidence of this is its beauty (29a). The entire discussion is meant to determine both the ontological status of the world and to convey its rational formation. The fact that this is expressed in historical terms is not surprising in the least. Cornford compares the unfolding of the rational order of the cosmos in time in the *Timaeus* to the historical unfolding of the ideal city in the *Republic* (Cornford, 27). Both accounts employ historical allegories to convey ahistorical truths.

Having come thus far, our discussion concerning whether Plato's *Timaeus* posits a temporal beginning to the world or not would be incomplete without a consideration of time itself. Put simply, the universe could not have been created in time because time itself is a feature of the created cosmos. "At the same time as he brought order to the universe", we are told, the craftsman created time as "an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity remaining in unity" (*Timaeus*, 37d). Unlike space which, as the receptacle of becoming, exists eternally as a necessary precondition for the cosmos, time comes to be simultaneously with the world; time is an important *aspect* of the rational order. Thus, Timaeus' account cannot be understood as positing a temporal origin for the world because there is literally no time in which this origination could take place. If Timaeus had truly wished to assert that the world had a temporal beginning, he could have accomplished this by giving time a status similar to space. Instead, he explicitly states that time and cosmos are inseparable, with both coming to be simultaneously. The reason for this is that Timaeus is more interested in time as illustrative of the rational

character of the world than he is in positing some sort of temporal beginning. Indeed, the very notion of the world coming to be at some primordial point in time – *in illo tempore*, to use Mircea Eliade’s term – is itself a fundamentally mythological notion, and Timaeus’ use of this archetypal motif must be interpreted accordingly.

Further, if time, as Timaeus insists, “came to be together with the universe” (38b), then there is no time at which the universe did not exist. In other words, the world has existed “for all time”. Finally, if we accept that time and cosmos have come to be at some point *in time*, we need to ask what the character of this *time prior to time* in which the world came to be is. The only possible answer is the eternal *Now* of sempiternity – a timeless time of which we can never say that is *was* or *will be* but only that it *is* (37e). Thus, if the world came to be in time, the only time in which this could have occurred is within the eternal *Now* of sempiternity, beyond all historicity. That is to say, the coming to be of the world did not occur at some past time but rather *is* eternally coming to be and passing away in timeless and unoriginated *Nowness*. Time is a moving image of eternity; as such, it possesses a beginningless beginning. The unceasing flow of time—of past, present, and future—creates an illusion of *Nowness*. Ultimately, past, present, and future are mere conceptual differentiations imposed upon undifferentiated eternity. Time is eternity from the divided perspective of becoming, of sense perception and opinion. Time, like the world of becoming to which it belongs, did not somehow come to be at some point in time *after* the eternal *Now* of the world of being. Instead, just as becoming is the unceasing reflection of being, so time is a beginningless image of eternity. While eternity and being may be ontologically prior to time and becoming, they are not prior in a temporal sense—no more so than the rising of the moon is prior in time to the appearance of its reflection in bodies of water.

I would like to conclude with a final reflection. Timaeus tells us not only that time is a moving image of eternity but that it is an *eternal* image of eternity (37d). Time as an eternal image of eternity suggests that time is itself beginningless. It is not that which “has come to be” but rather “that which always becomes but never is” (28c, 28a). This is confirmed when Timaeus states that while its sempiternal model has being for all eternity, time “has been, is, and shall be for all time, forevermore” (38c). Time itself exists *for all time*. This passage suggests that it is not only the future that extends to infinity but also the past. Indeed, it is questionable whether time could properly be said to be an image of eternity if it possesses a finite beginning and if its “infinity” extends only in one direction, namely, into the future. Instead, time, as the image of eternity, must itself be beginningless. The representation of time as circular, moreover, points to its beginningless character. Past, present, and future, Timaeus says, “are forms of time that have come to be – time that imitates eternity and circles according to number” (38b). If Timaeus speaks of the world as literally coming to be in time, this requires a linear conception of time. This necessitates a timeline with a definite beginning point stretching out to an infinite future. The image of time we are presented with, however, is a circular one. Time is the infinite circling of the stars and planets, “a moving image of eternity” (37d). The image of time as circular motion conveys perfectly the sense of the beginningless becoming of the world. On the one hand, it is impossible to posit a definite beginning for circular motion; on the other

hand, each moment of circular motion is simultaneously a beginning and an ending. Rather than coming to be in a linear fashion at some finite point in time, the world along with time exists in a continual state of beginningless becoming as the perfect, circular image of eternity. It is “that which always becomes but never is” (28a).