

The 'Productionist' Framework of the *Timaeus*

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The cosmology of the *Timaeus* is a very strange mixture of traditional legends, Platonic myths and philosophical arguments. The question of whether this cosmology was meant by Plato to be taken literally or figuratively has always been fiercely debated and, from the very first age of Platonic study, has divided Platonists into two main groups. Aristotle, Plutarch and Atticus, followed more or less closely in modern times by Th.-H Martin, Th. Gomperz, Brochard, Rivaud, Vlastos and Hackforth, hold a 'literalist' view on it; whereas Xenocrates, Crantor, Proclus and other neo-Platonists, as well as Taylor, Cornford and Cherniss, proposed different 'interpretive' analyses of it.¹

In what follows I shall enter this debate and attempt to reconcile, somehow, the two positions by claiming that we have to distinguish between the *framework* and the *details* of this cosmology, and that only the former was meant by Plato to be taken literally; the argument on which this claim is grounded has, to the best of my knowledge, not been used before.

A modern reader of the *Timaeus* would be rather inclined, I suppose (relying also upon Plato's own characterisation of his cosmology as being only a likely, *eikon*, 'account'—cf. 29 b 5–c 2, d, 30 b, 48 d, 53 d, 55 d, 56 a, 57 d, 59 c, 68 b, 69 b, 90 e), to take this 'productionist framework' metaphorically and conclude that Plato, although he did not strongly believe in a divine creation, chose for pedagogical reasons to explain the world in terms of the pragmatic-instrumentalist activity of *human* beings, whose most obvious example is the production of artefacts,² and that he, by doing this, consciously anthropomorphized his cosmology.³

1. Needless to say, the secondary literature on this issue is enormous. For references to those commentators involved in this debate see, *inter alios*, P. Frutiger, *Les Mythes de Platon* (Paris, 1930), 200 nn. 1 and 2; A.E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* (Oxford, 1928), 67 ff.; R. Hackforth, "Plato's Cosmogony (*Timaeus* 27 d ff.)," in *Classical Quarterly* IX (1949), 17–22; and T.M. Robinson, *Plato's Psychology*, 2nd ed. (U of Toronto P, 1995), 59–62.

2. I note here in passing that Aristotle's objection that Plato did not admit the existence of forms of *artefacta* (cf. *Metaph.* 990 b 8 ff., 991 b 4 ff., 1070 a 13 ff.) can easily be dismissed, since Plato does not mention them (e.g. in *R.* 596 b, 597 c; *Cra.* 389 b–c; and the Seventh Letter 342 d).

3. A more complicated answer would be to claim that Plato tried to understand the world

To take the 'productionist' framework of Plato's metaphysics as being essentially a *metaphorical discourse* has many advantages, the chief being that—since any metaphorical discourse offers only a *partial* analogy—we can 'dispose' of the situations in which the terms of the productionist paradigm become too farfetched (or even 'naive'). As far as I am concerned, I am reluctant to take Plato's 'productionist framework' metaphorically and conclude that he consciously anthropomorphized his cosmology (for, say, pedagogical reasons). The main aim of my paper is to show that one cannot 'charge' Plato with such a view, and my argument can fairly be represented like this: to take the 'productionist framework' of the *Timaeus* metaphorically means actually to take the Demiurge's *poiesis* as a 'metaphorical projection' of the *human poiesis*. But, as I shall argue, there is enough textual evidence to back up the claims that (i) Plato did believe in a divine *poiesis*, and that (ii) for him it was the *human poiesis* which was, as it were, a 'projection' of the *divine poiesis*.⁴ If so, for him, it is not that the *divinity*, when it frames the universe, is 'copying' a *human* craftsman, but, on the contrary, the human craftsman, when he produces artefacts, is 'copying' the divinity; and this implies that we cannot but take his 'productionist' framework literally.

Now, what is actually divine, *theion*, in Plato's cosmology? First, it is the Demiurge who framed the universe and everything that exists in it (cf. *Ti.* 28 a ff., 29 d–e, 31 b, etc), for he, being good (*agathos*), free from jealousy (29 e) and the 'best of causes' (29 a) managed to make a wonderful copy of a perfect model (cf. 29 a, 92 c). Secondly, it is the model of the universe, for it is *always the same* (i.e. eternal), and that which is always the same, *to auto aei einai*, is divine, *theion* (cf. *Smp.* 208 a 8–b 1). Thirdly, it is the universe itself, but taken *as a whole* (cf. *Ti.* 34 b 1); for the universe, being not *limited* in time (31 b, 33 a, 38 c 1–3), embodies, to a certain extent, that which is divine in the model, namely its eternity. And fourthly, it is man's soul. Let us note in passing, however, that man's soul is divine for several reasons: (i)

in terms of a basic human behaviour, namely production, because he *had no choice*, not because he chose to. That is: the pragmatic-instrumentalist activity of human beings, one may claim, has an *existential* priority, because for each of us the world of tools is 'our first world,' and that is why we think in productionist terms. One who took this idea seriously was Heidegger: cf. for instance *Sein und Zeit*, Gesamtausgabe Band 19 (Frankfurt am Main, 1977). Heidegger also claimed, however, that it is to be found in Plato: cf. for instance *Sph.* 219 a ff., where, Heidegger argues, *ousia* is determined as *Hergestelltsein*, *Platon: Sophistes*, Gesamtausgabe 2 (Frankfurt am Main, 1977): 269–70. Given the space I have at my disposal I shall not open this can of worms (although, I think, this challenging line of argument may lead to some rewarding insights into Plato's metaphysics).

4. I am indebted to Mr. Alexandru Dragomir for drawing my attention to this point. In a rather rough form, I presented this point at a workshop of the IV Symposium Platonicum, held at the University of Granada in August 1995; I am also indebted to my audience at that workshop for many interesting ideas.

because it is immortal (cf. *Ti.* 90 e ff.) (i.e. because it embodies that which is divine in the model of the universe, namely its eternity); (ii) because it copies, when it deals in its earthly life with 'real' philosophy, the divine movement of the soul of the universe (cf. 90 b-c); and (iii) because it copies the model's eternity, when in its earthly life it 'remains the same' for the sake of something believed to be good (like Socrates did).

"I believe in the right of every man to worship God in his own metaphor"—goes a beautiful saying.⁵ This view, I think, would have been fully endorsed by Plato; for his cosmology and eschatology do not state anything about how man should worship that which is divine; his cosmology and eschatology claim only that we cannot but think about cosmos and man within a 'productionist framework,' and that the main 'elements' of this framework—the *creator*, the *model* and the *product*—cannot but be thought of as (fully or partially) *divine* (eternity, 'rationality,' freedom and goodness being the main features of divinity). In short: for Plato, the cosmos (and everything in it) is the 'offspring' of a divine *poiesis*.⁶

Now, the tendency of a *modern* reader of the *Timaeus* to take the Demiurge's *poiesis* as a 'projection' of the *human poiesis* (and so to 'charge' Plato with a conscious 'anthropomorphic view') points out, in my opinion, one of the most important differences between Plato's *Weltanschauung* and ours. For he, unlike the modern reader in general, believed that everything is 'held' by something which is divine, *theion* (cf., besides the *Timaeus*, *Ion* 534 e, *Sph.* 265 b-d, *Phl.* 269 d ff., *Lg.* X, 890 a ff., 907 a). And so it is with man: human 'good things' are 'suspended' upon the divine 'good things' (*Lg.* 631 b) and man himself is 'suspended'—like an inverted tree (*Ti.* 90 a-b), or like a puppet (*Lg.* 644 d-e)—upon something divine (cf. also *Ion* 536 a and *Phlb.* 29 c-d). Yet not only are we *suspended* upon what is divine; we also *copy* in our activities the 'gestures' of that which is divine (our soul, for instance, in its revolutions, is actually trying to copy the revolutions of the divine soul of the world—cf. *Ti.* 47 c; cf. also *Mx.* 238 a 4-5: "... the woman on her conception and generation is but the imitation of the [divine] earth, and not the earth of the woman").

If so, then Plato's *Weltanschauung* is not actually 'anthropomorphic,' but rather 'theomorphic,' because for him (unlike for Protagoras—cf. *Tht.* 171 a ff) man is *not* the measure of all things (cf. also *Phd.* 80 a: "it is the nature of the divine [*to theion*] to rule and direct, and that of the mortal [*to thneton*] to

5. Cited by S.R. Hopper, "Introduction," in Hopper and Miller, eds., *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning* (New York, 1967), xviii.

6. Cf. also J.B. Skemp, *Plato* (Oxford, 1976), 56: "The questions of divinity and of ultimate causation are not really separable in considering Plato."

7. All translations of Plato's texts are from Hamilton and Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton UP, 1989).

be subject and serve"). So, when he claims that man is the only animal who has gods (*theoi*) (*Mx.* 237 d), and that 'god' is man's *hegemon* (as he says in *Smp.* 193 b 1–2, 197 d 3, and e 2 about the god of love) we have, I think, to take him seriously.

For Plato, however, there are two kinds of *poesis*, the *theion* and the *anthropinon* kind (cf., *inter alia*, *Sph.* 265 b); so it would be in his spirit to take the *anthropinon* production as, so to speak, a 'projection of the *theion* production (cf. *Lg.* 902 e: "we are *never*, then, to fancy God [*theos*] the inferior of human workmen"—my italics; and *Smp.* 197 a: "in every *techne*, the [human] *demiourgos* who achieves the brightest fame is the one whose *didaskalos* is the god, *theos* [i.e. Eros], while those that lack his influence grow old in the shadow of oblivion"; cf. also *Lg.* 907 a and *R.* 597 c–d).

So, *platonically* speaking, when a *human demiourgos*—be he a *zographos*, an *oikodomos*, a *nauegos* (cf. *Grg.* 503 e ff), an *iatros* (cf. *Smp.* 186 d ff), a *mousikos* (cf. *Smp.* 187 a–c), or a *nomothetes* (i.e. a 'names-maker'—see *Cra.* 389 a 2–3, and a 'legislator'—see *Lg.* 628 c)—puts each of his 'materials' in an order (*taxis*) and combines them into a *kekosmemenon pragma* (cf. *Grg.* 504 a 1, *Smp.* 186 d ff., 187 a–c, *Cra.* 389 d–e, *Lg.* 626 c, 628 a), he is actually 'repeating' the 'archetypal gesture' of the *divine demiourgos*, by which the whole world was brought from disorder into order (cf. *Ti.* 30 a 5: *eis taxin auto egamen ek tes ataxias*). (Cf. also *R.* 597 c–d: when a carpenter makes a couch having in his mind the 'model,' *eidos*, of couch, which was 'made' by God, he is actually copying what the God did.) That is: for Plato, it is not that the *divinity*, when it frames the universe, is 'copying' a *human* craftsman, but, on the contrary, the human craftsman, when he produces artefacts, is 'copying' the divinity.⁸

To conclude:

(i) To take the 'productionist framework' of the *Timaeus* metaphorically means actually to take the Demiurge's *poiesis* as a 'metaphorical projection' of the *human poiesis*;

(ii) but, since Plato did believe in a *divine poiesis*, and since for him it was the *human poiesis* which was, as it were, a 'projection' of the *divine poiesis*, one cannot but take the 'productionist framework' of the *Timaeus* literally (and so, we have to absolve Plato from the charge of consciously adopting, for whatever purposes, an anthropomorphic view).

8. At first sight, the idea that all human acts, like the act of making, should be considered only a 'repetition' of an archetypal divine gesture, may seem very strange, but it is to be found in many ancient myths. Cf. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London, 1958). As Eliade put it: "the creation of the world is the exemplar for all constructions. Every new town, every new house that is built, imitates afresh, and in a sense repeats, the creation of the world Like sacred space, mythical time can be repeated *ad infinitum* with every new thing man makes" (379–80).

At the beginning of the *Republic's* Book X, at 596 c, Socrates asks his interlocutors: "Could it be a Craftsman able to produce all plants and animals, including himself, and thereto earth and heaven and the gods and all things in heaven and in Hades under the earth?" Yes, seems to be Plato's answer, even if this appears incredible, or half-true, in the sense that from one point of view there could be such a creator of all things, and from another not (see 596 d). To take the 'productionist framework' of the *Timaeus* literally means only to claim that for Plato the whole universe was framed by a *divine dynamis*, from a 'primordial given matter' and according to *logos* and *episteme* (cf. *Sph.* 265 c 8), i.e. according to a 'rational blueprint' (or 'model').

In the *Critias* (107 a–b) Plato says that 'to speak about gods is easy for we do not know much about them.' And so for him the 'details' of one 'theology' or another, including his own, may not be, for several reasons, fully acceptable; and that is why, I think, he calls his cosmology a 'likely account'—cf. *Ti.* 29 b 5–c 2, etc. Yet in spite of this explicit 'warning,' many modern commentators of the *Timaeus* concentrate on the *details* of Plato's cosmogony (whose precision goes rather far) and overlook the fact that he did believe that that which is responsible for the way our world is, is 'something divine' (cf. also *Ion* 534 e, *Sph.* 265 b–d. *Plt.* 269 d ff., *Lg.* X, 890 a ff., 907 a, etc.).⁹

9. As I said, Plato claims that his cosmology is only a likely, *eikon*, 'account' (cf. 29 b 5–c 2, d, 30 b, etc.). But, since he took the *framework* of his cosmology *literally* (as I have argued), the *eikon* character of his cosmology must be due to its *details*. What is then an *eikon* detail? In my view, there are two kinds of detail involved in the cosmology of the *Timaeus*. First, there are the fantastical details, which attempt to turn an abstract matter into a non-abstract one (e.g. the details which depict the divine *dynamis* that framed the universe as a Demiurge that looks at a model with his own eyes—cf. 28 a). These details *allegorously*, that is: they imply other, *allos*, than what they say; and this *other* refers to something *anaistheton*, whereas *that which is said* represents an *aistheton* 'embodiment' of that *other*. Now, such an *allegorical* detail is *eikon* in the sense that it is an *aistheton eikon*, i.e. a non-abstract simile (or 'copy') of something *anaistheton*. Secondly, there are the details that attempt to speak about a non-abstract matter in non-abstract, but only plausible terms (e.g. the details which describe the triangles from which the elementary bodies are made—cf. 53 c ff.). These details do not imply other than what they say; they refer, in non-abstract terms, to something *aistheton* which is not, from one reason or another, *perceptible* (as it is the case with the triangles from which the elementary bodies are made, which are too small to be perceived). Now, since we cannot have a direct access to that *aistheton ti*, any detail about it can only be (more or less) plausible. That is: such a *non-allegorical* detail is *eikon* in the sense that it is *likely to be true* (whereas in the former case, an *allegorical* detail is *eikon* in the sense that it is a non-abstract simile of something *anaistheton*). To sum up: the cosmology of the *Timaeus* contains a general *framework* (which I have called 'productionist') and an enormous amount of *details*; and, as I have argued, Plato wanted us to take the *framework* of his cosmology *literally*, and its details either *metaphorically* (when they turn an abstract matter into a non-abstract one), or *literally*, but to think of them as being *only probable* (when they deal, in non-abstract terms, with a non-abstract matter to which we cannot have a 'direct access').

Or, when this belief is not overlooked, it is usually explained as being a 'conscious' or 'unconscious' attempt of 'anthropomorphisation.'¹⁰

Until very recently, when 'deep ecology' activists tried to initiate a biocentric egalitarianism, man has always considered himself a sort of '*nomenclatura* of existence.' For Plato, however, this is not the case, because for him man is neither the supreme being in universe (a view which occurs in Aristotle as well, cf. *EN* 1141 a 20–5), nor the 'crown of creation' (which for him was the soul of the universe—cf. *Ti.* 37 a). Plato was anything but a primitive thinker; yet for him, unlike for us, man was not the 'substance' of all things. Today we tend not to take Plato seriously when he claims that we and the universe itself are the offsprings of a god (cf. *Sph.* 265 c, 266 b; *Ti. passim*). But this is not the real problem. For us, as for Plato, the universe was created *meta logou te kai epistemes* (*Sph.* 265 c 8); but for us these *logos* and *episteme* are no longer 'divine,' *theia* (cf. c 9). For Plato, on the contrary (precisely because he believed that man is hung, like an inverted tree or like a puppet, upon something that is divine) all human acts, like the act of making, must be mere repetitions of god's gestures (in the way a ritual is thought to be a symbolic restoration of a divine, inaugural 'performance').

If so, then one cannot but take the 'productionist' theory of the *Timaieus* literally (although, I agree, the *details* of the Demiurge's *poiesis* are to be taken as 'likely'), and absolve Plato from the charge of consciously adopting, purely for explanatory purposes, an anthropomorphic view. And, I think, he should also be absolved from the charge of founding the productionist *Weltanschauung*, which—according to some philosophers, such as Heidegger—is responsible for the contemporary technological view that everything is a raw material for human production and consumption. For, in Plato's 'productionist metaphysics'—unlike in some other philosophical views grounded on 'production,' such as Nietzsche's or Marx's, which, arguably, may be blamed for leading to the 'contemporary technological view'—the *human demiourgos*, being only a copy of the *divine demiourgos*, does not attempt to raise himself to a position of an *all-embracing demiurge*.

10. Even Heidegger, for whom the question of 'god' (and of 'god's absence from the modern world') seems to be of a considerable importance, does not take the 'theological aspect' of Greek philosophy too seriously. And for him, as for the majority of modern scholars, the *ground* of Greek philosophy should be sought in *man*, not in *god*. Cf. *Sein und Zeit*, 34: "Die Problematik der griechischen Ontologie muß wie die einer jeden Ontologie ihren Leitfaden aus dem Dasein selbst nehmen."