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Philosophy Final

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*Why am I reading this, anyway?* – Trying to justify reading the Timaeus

Many high school math educators have to deal with so-called “class-clowns” who lampoon the need to learn “Imaginary” numbers due to the paradoxical nature of such a statement. These students may be acting in bad faith, but the good faith analogue ends up as Philosophy. Why does something that we cannot perceive, even in a pure form, deserve to be talked about or even thought about? The *Timaeus* gets at these foundational questions of Philosophy and Epistemology. Yet, it constantly interrupts itself, admitting again and again that its previous statements were an inadequate or at least incomplete picture of the cosmos. A reader in retrospect will likely ask themselves why they have spent any time reading this text at all, given its indeterminate nature…

So, why should we read Timaeus’s speech? One reason is that the demiurge gave us eyes. This gift was given to us “in order that, by observing the circuits of intellect in heaven, we might use them for the orbits of the thinking within us […] [and] we might stabilize the wander-stricken circuits in ourselves”[[1]](#footnote-1). It is a source of happiness to be able to witness the fine work of the creator. It is for this reason that Socrates is unable to hold back his excitement after recanting yesterday’s speeches chronicling the eidetic city, because “[we] get a desire to gaze upon them moving and contending in some struggle that seemed appropriate to their bodies”[[2]](#footnote-2). But we are now left with a chicken or the egg problem: are we happy because we necessarily pursue knowledge, or do pursue knowledge because we are necessarily happy[[3]](#footnote-3)? Timaeus answers this riddle when he outlines the differences between the two kinds of causes, between the necessary and the divine:

The divine we should search out in all things for the sake of a life of such happiness as our nature admits; the necessary for the sake of the divine, reflecting that apart from the necessary those other objects of our serious study cannot by themselves be perceived or communicated, nor can we in any other way have part or lot in them.[[4]](#footnote-4)

By becoming conscious of the creator’s handiwork, we find happiness. We read this work because we are trying to become as happy as “our nature admits”, but also because have no other choice: We do things out of necessity for the sake of our happiness. I would not be able to enjoy the fruits of living without a great deal of manual labor to reproduce the necessities that we use on a daily basis. Correspondingly, we necessarily seek out a beautiful and true accounting, or *logos* of the world around us, because we are *logismos* individuals, that is, we reason.

And it is here where Timaeus begins again, for now the “materials for our building lie ready sorted to our hand”[[5]](#footnote-5). Timaeus summarizes his speech and here confirms the standard platonic distinction of imitation and likeness. The original “maker” created the gods in his own likeness, and the gods imitated this behavior by creating mortals[[6]](#footnote-6). Mortals complete this cycle by first creating food and goods (out of necessity) suitable to allow movement, action, and most notably, procreation of these newly ensouled mortals[[7]](#footnote-7). The creation of these mortals *must* happen, for a failure to do so would be analogues to forgetting to account for all of the “animals” within the demiurge, and thus, heaven “[would] be imperfect[[8]](#footnote-8). Thus, our god of gods created us out of a “left-over” material, not previously accounted for by his prior creation of the “all”. Out of this original unity, we are multiplied into individuals via the process of division: a type of *logismos*. This is a necessity, for there is no way to say that something is “closer” or “better” or “greater” without some way to compare it to something “further” or “worse” or “smaller”. These comparisons “by nature tend to be contrary and set at odds with each other”[[9]](#footnote-9).

And it is out of  that Timaeus sees “human nature [as] being twofold”[[10]](#footnote-10). Since for the Greeks, the number two was the real “first” number, as it is the only at the point of duality that a *logos* becomes available. We can only count when we have a beginning and an end such that counting “always comes to a rest when we pronounce a word like five”[[11]](#footnote-11). And since two is the first even number, it is also the first divisible number. This is the first number which necessitates a *logos*. For these reasons, most of the ancient Greek mathematicians regarded even as “good” and odd as “bad”[[12]](#footnote-12) or more accurately, . And as dutifully notes, the possibility of describing a “number of” objects, without there being any more information conveyed outside of a certain form of ordering, implies the existence of so called “pure numbers” for Plato[[13]](#footnote-13). Are my 2 pies giant pies, or 1 medium pie? 1 giant pie could be made into 2 medium pies, etc.

And this is why Timaeus is so blatantly sexist, declaring that “the superior part of [human nature] would be a king which at a later point would be called Man”. There is a “number” two, which has two equal parts, but in order to get to unity, we must have the “number” of “being”[[14]](#footnote-14). Being is the “idea of two”, but the units of this new number are unequal, as they are contraries.

Klein’s example of these contraries is the “Rest – Change” distinction. A similar distinction exists between Men and Women. Men were the superior of the units of this being, as they possess a stronger build and are expected to imitate the ordering and crafting of the gods. Women were instead child-bearers, imitators of those who “grow” food. Unlike a craftsperson with crafting, there is no certainty that they would succeed in child-rearing even given ideal conduct from the mother. Thus, Women were the inferior of this distinction by necessity. For this reason, we can conclude that Timaeus affirms a clear platonic distinction in this *logos*.

Yet in the discussion between reason and necessity, Timaeus denies another platonic reading of his *logos*. The traditional understanding of the platonic *demiurge* as being “omnipotent” came about because of mistranslations proliferated by scholars like Taylor and Archer-Hind[[15]](#footnote-15). The Demiurge is a craftsperson. Therefore, they need material to craft with. Humans are crafted out of a concoction of Same, Other and Being. The craftsperson was not the creator of Same and Other[[16]](#footnote-16), and experiences limits imposed on its power based on the necessity of their materials. If we consider these mistranslations to be what our notion of “Platonism” is informed by (as Cornford seems to do), then we can conclude that Timaeus is interrupting Platonism by explaining necessity as being a prior consideration to the *demiurges* craft.

Worried as we may be about “Platonism” corrupting our reading of Plato, this interpretation has some merit. A standard Judo-Christian influenced reading of a omnipotent *demiurge* would imply a similar sense of humans as being made in “gods image” or in our case, in “the craftsperson’s image”. Cornford points out that “The principle 'Like moves towards like' is important for our purpose; for we find it, still as an ultimate unexplained assumption, at work in the chaos of the Timaeus”[[17]](#footnote-17). Luckily, the *paradeigma* that we were fashioned out of was beautiful and good! Good people will become happy, and possess a certain  to the creator, which is radiant. For once, a biblical notion of perfection lines-up with its Platonic analogue.

When Timaeus interrupts himself (again) on 48E and 49, he recants the distinction between the intelligible and becoming made earlier in his speech. He explains that though it was previously good enough for our uses, we need something further to make a “fuller classification”. This is known as the “Receptacle” which is the nurse of all “becoming” and all that is visible. Such language and descriptions may remind one of Kant’s “thing-in-itself” and his subsequent description of time and space as blank slates which are not contained by this “thing-in-itself” as well as his evidence of the non-visibility of said “thing-in-itself”. Cornford is keen to remind us that the word   
*Kora* is not even used until 52A, meaning that this receptacle is something more complicated and doesn’t necessarily allow for an analogous reading to that of Kant.

Regardless, there is textual evidence for a Kantian interpretation of Plato’s receptacle. Plato explains that we should not describe the elements as “ ‘this’, but as ' what is of such and such a quality' […] nor must we speak of anything else as having some permanence, among all the things we indicate by the expressions' this' or ' that', imagining we are pointing out some definite thing”[[18]](#footnote-18). What’s most interesting here is that we are not ever told directly what this receptacle is outside of the previous passages, meaning that a form of interpretation and understanding via metaphor or the ideas of another is inevitable and potentially even desired. If nothing else, we are expected to have difficulty with wrapping our heads around the Receptacle. It may not be “unnamable” as *Kora* is sometimes said to be, but it is “all-receiving, partaking in some very puzzling way of the intelligible and [is] very hard to apprehend”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Plato may have been as willing as Kant to “confess thereby that they are based upon a thing in itself, though we know not this thing as it is in itself, but only know its appearances”[[20]](#footnote-20) . We know of fire by its name because despite its chaotic and everchanging nature; It has a similar set of qualities or “such-and-such-ness”[[21]](#footnote-21) to allow for a naming, but it lacks a material substance that leaves it within the realm of the Receptacle, only the Receptacle can be called a “this” or rather a “thing-in-itself”. Here we see a displacement from the standard platonic and dualistic theory of forms articulated in the *Republic*. Given that *Timaeus* was written after the *Republic*, the evolution of this theory of forms is to be expected, but it also alarmingly implies that our knowledge is never perfect or indeed, even trustworthy enough to rely on. Our imitation of gods’ wisdom via the search for that wisdom has stark implications for Epistemology.

And it is these questions that are pondered by Timaeus. Timaeus investigates the existence of the forms in the following passage:

Is there such a thing as 'Fire just in itself' or any of the other things which we are always describing in such terms, as things that 'are just in themselves'? Or are the things we see or otherwise perceive by the bodily senses the only things that have such reality and has nothing else, over and above these, any sort of being at all? Are we talking idly whenever we say that there is such a thing as an intelligible Form of anything? Is this nothing more than a word?[[22]](#footnote-22)

Timaeus ultimately concludes that these things in themselves, which he directly calls “forms” do exist “in themselves”. Moreover, he concludes that this is analogous to saying that “true belief” and “intelligence” are two different things. If no distinction were to be made between *dianoia* and *mythos*, than we can claim instead that “all things we perceive through the bodily senses must be taken as the most certain reality”[[23]](#footnote-23). There is a real, objective world of “things-in-themselves” that we do not necessarily perceive, but whose existence is something more than simply a “word”.

And I claim that this observation: that there is an objective reality and that the knowledge of this reality is obtained via a usually dialectical and ultimately collectivist method could be the underlying reason we are to read this text, for “true belief […] is shared by all mankind, [but] intelligence only by the gods and a small number of men”. Those comments in *Republic* which conclude that the farmer should not rule are affirmed, as the vast majority of people are unintelligent. We can understand this more clearly by bringing up another German who holds the possible distinction of being the antithesis of Socrates, Max Stirner.

Within Stirners magnum opus: *The Unique and Its Property*, He spends a portion of the beginning explaining the source of the so called “higher essences” that he tries to banish. Stirner rejects the metaphysical privileging of collectivist thinking over proprietary thinking, and cites Socrates as having “opened this war, [whose] peaceful end does not occur until the dying day of the old world” [[24]](#footnote-24). Stirner also cites Socrates as the founder of ethics, because Socrates understood that using *nous* in all things wasn’t good enough. A bad usage of this *nous* leads to tyranny and a wicked heart, so therefor one has to cultivate a “good” heart. Therefor, one must ponder upon what the “good cause” is. Yet, “to serve the good cause-is to be moral. Thus, Socrates is the founder of ethics”[[25]](#footnote-25). If one is to interpret Stirner’s comments as being another “Platonic” reading of Plato, than I’d claim that the Timaeus affirms that reading.

Thus, we can conclude that the Timaeus acts as a certain kind of interruption of Platonic thought that doesn’t account for the cosmological evolutions within it. Timaeus has to interrupt himself repeatedly so that he can continue to present new ideas, as they become necessary to explain phenomena and attempt to explain nomena. Because politics is considered to be a prior necessity to any accounting of the cosmos, Timaeus justifies the primacy of collective knowledge (of which writing is a medium of delivering) over sophistic “good belief”. Thus, we are left with an answer to why we should read the *Timaeus:* Read it because truth, and good-heartedness are best conveyed by the image of the demiurge.

1. Plato*, Timaeus*, 47c [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 19c [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For if we weren’t happy in general, we’d eventually commit suicide or stop reproducing [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 68E-69 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, 69A [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 69C [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 41C [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, 41B [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid 42B [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 42A [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Klen *Lectures and Essays*, 44 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cornford, *Platos Cosmology,* 165 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Though since Being is a mixture of Same and Other, one could say that Being was created. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid 169 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 49D-50 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 51A-B [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Kant, Prologue to *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 32; here I mean “qualities” when he uses “they” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cornford, *Platos Cosmology,* 180 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Plato, *Timaeus,* 51C [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid, 51E [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Stirner, *The Unique and Its Property*, 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Stirner, *The Unique and Its Property*, 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)