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*Cities of Plato* – Finding Politics in the Timaeus

Trying to find “meaning” from reading the early political discourse within the *Timaeus* seems like an uphill battle to the unaware reader. In the assigned translation, the word “politics” doesn’t seem to appear directly in the Kalkovitch translation and appears only once in the Jowett translation[[1]](#footnote-1), yet the *Timaeus* as a text is undoubtedly political. In recognition of the “violence” of translation and interpretation that thinkers such as Derrida and Sallis articulate, the competing accounts of the “first” city can be characterized as an exercise in the futility of a non-political accounting of the cosmos. For Plato, an accounting of the cosmos *is* a political accounting.

Plato claims that a speech should be similar to that of a “being”, complete with a head, body and extremities. Jowett goes as far as to translate the end of 19A as “Then have I now given you all the heads of our yesterday's discussion? Or is there anything more, my dear Timaeus, which has been omitted?”[[2]](#footnote-2). While Kalkavage chooses not to include the word head here, his translation can furnish us with additional context about Socrates intentions. To have “given all the heads of discussion” is to have recited the previous days discussion of the ideal city. Yet, Kalkavage notes that Socrates has failed to give a complete summary of the previous days speech. The head, like the speech and like the summary presented here, is incomplete.

The beginning of this dialogue includes a certain unintelligible, “final justification” for its existence, which is not necessarily clearly articulated. The ethereal nature of this justification is the “paradeigma” or model[[3]](#footnote-3) which the divine “father” fashions in our soul[[4]](#footnote-4). The “”[[5]](#footnote-5) of this head, a “head of heads” (or an  of ’s), is thus a question of foundational principles from which we can find some insight into the nature of this “unseen” fourth, which defies our senses. This is the realm of specters and gods; whose worldly appearances defy us. Timaeus even reserves the head of his speech for these gods, whose minds are the models for our human minds: “after we’ve called upon both gods and goddesses, to pray that all we say be to their mind above all and, following that, to our own”[[6]](#footnote-6).

The “” of “’s in this dialogue is Socrates recantation of the previous days speeches. Socrates had already done his duty by speaking the previous day, and it was now time for him to become the . Socrates radical hospitality is a certain “refuge” from the toils of daily existence. It is not possible to recant a story of the cosmos or of the perfect city if our protagonists had to toil in the fields to survive. Those who set the habits (ethos) into place must be those who are experienced in both the  and the. This is why Critias praises the dual competences of Timaeus, as he was a high ranking administrator in a (for them) contemporary “city of laws”. He is the man most suitable to speak about the “all”[[7]](#footnote-7). A politics, or “ordering” of the city is a prior necessity to the cosmological accounting of the origin of the cosmos.

Socrates recanting of the previous days speech wasn’t faithful, so the reader therefor must compensate for this incompleteness. Socrates must *remember* what was spoken about before. Yet, a perfect recollection is never possible[[8]](#footnote-8), and thus the readers interpretive faculties are required. What are we supposed to do when we, like poor Solon[[9]](#footnote-9), make mistakes in our recollection? Why, we write down information so as to render it unchanging. Unfortunately, writing is only in the realm of the of the sensible, which is ultimately supplemental to the speech act. Speech provides the context necessary to covey a certain “spirit” that writing lacks the faculty of. Even if the first point of history had been recorded in writing, it would not be able to convey .

This literacy is exactly what leads the Greeks to become “forgetful”[[10]](#footnote-10). The act of writing causes a diffusion of the original history of the Greeks into temples and dusty tomes. Literacy becomes the standard of “education” and when those faithful folks are periodically purged by the floodwaters of the gods, only the “illiterate and uneducated” remain. The writing that the Greeks rely on flings them into a perpetual state of youth, natality, and “beginning again”. Because of the forgetfulness inherent to those who seek knowledge[[11]](#footnote-11), we find ourselves forgetting and recollecting ad infinitum. Critias accuses Socrates of having forgotten something, of having recollected an “abridged version, so to speak”[[12]](#footnote-12). Through some “divine chance”, Critias realizes Socrates fell into the same trap that Solon did.

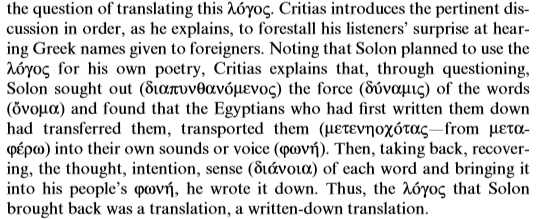
To a modern reader, Critias’s belief in the faithfulness of his own recollection of the story of Solon seems arrogant. He seems so sure that he “recovered pretty much everything” unlike the considerably more recent knowledge gained from yesterday’s discussions. And since their self-styled objective of this discussion is “setting down as a foundation some account suited to our plans”, the “burned-in” prior accounting of the Greek origin is necessary for their eventual “plan”. Critias is claiming that Socrates’s accounting of the idea city is supposed to be the “origin” of history – a prior necessity that we find ourselves fashioning pragmatic, worldly cities from. Yet, Critias leaves some doubt of this account in his final sentence, when he boldly proclaims that “one must consider whether this account is to our mind, or whether one is to search further for another instead of it”. It is simply not possible for either Socrates or Critias alone to decide what is true and what is fabrication, nor can they easily decide when their search for truth has run its course. They must instead act as a unified “court of judges”[[13]](#footnote-13) about the metaphysics of our cosmos.

But, to be a presiding judge implies a certain amount of indeterminateness. Legal justifications are only set in stone or “burned-in” until a case where their interpretation is in question. John Sallis is critical of traditional interpretations of the politics found within the Timaeus precisely because we assume a certain prescriptive -ism is advocated by these dialogues. In much the same way that Arendt so vulgarly claims “that Platonic thought extends the law of the household to the regulation of the  at large”[[14]](#footnote-14), I have claimed a certain metaphysics is advocated by the participants of this dialogue. If the “violence” done to the *Timaeus* is because of the inevitable “eidetic determination“ inherent to translation, and because of the continuous “reading and non-reading” of the text, than how are we to proceed? How should I justify that one should read this to someone who is not a native speaker of platonic-era Greek with advanced knowledge of Greek philosophy?

I struggle to answer this question. My first instinct is to re-read the *Timaeus*[[15]](#footnote-15), and to read more secondary sources. Do I then re-perpetuate the same cycle of translatory violence back onto Plato? If I decide to do otherwise, then I’m simply *not reading*. Similar to how “not acting” is a kind of action, my decision to not read would be a kind of *surrendering* of the *Timaeus* to someone else’s “eidetic determination”. My frustration results from consciously being made aware of the limits of my ability to understand this text. The interpretive process: of judging, of accounting for, and of ordering is the prior necessity to any “accounting of the origins of” or of an “original provocation”. One must specify what was first in the claiming of an “original”. If said “specification” is then said to be the first, we have again specified, and are left unsure of what the original provocation is.

The “archaic city” that Critias recounts stands in stark contrast to the Socratic eidetic city. This city is claimed to have “actually” existed in a “singular place”[[16]](#footnote-16), rather than act as some sort of paradigm or model for a fabricated city. Despite their supposedly irrecoverable differences, Critias declares that “the citizens you had in mind are those true ancestors of ours about whom the priest was speaking”[[17]](#footnote-17) . Sallis notes that the main difference between these cities is that they are “*told of differently”[[18]](#footnote-18)*. The legal and social differences that these cities have are as a result of the imperfection of remembering as well as the inevitable subjectivity of translation. Legal courts asks for multiple witnesses whenever possible, whose testimony might be radically different yet still accounting for the same crime. Since we are the “judges” of the accountings of the cosmos, it makes sense that we listen to the full range of witness testimony. Each new witness is asked to “start from the beginning again”, yet if a witness gave the exact same testimony as the previous, we would distrust their testimony as a “fabrication”[[19]](#footnote-19). Given the court of law analogies presented here, it becomes obvious why the Greeks would privilege speaking over writing.

Despite this privileging, Sallis is reminds the reader that even Critias’s account includes a fair amount of writing and translating[[20]](#footnote-20):



It’s difficult to imagine then, that Critias’s accounting can be said to be “complete”, yet it’s presentation calls into question the eidetic cities political ordering of its city by virtue of being a different accounting. Two witnesses have been called, and now we must deliberate about the case in front of us.

Thus, the *Timaeus’s* original provocation of the cosmos takes on a decisively political concern, because the ability to order, or account for a beginning requires us to act as judges of violently translated claims that have no chance of direct verifiability. By speaking of “what is more true” or “what is first”, we have necessarily already claimed a certain ordering of the cosmos. This question of ordering is the *raison d’etre* of politics, and since political accounting is a prior necessity to cosmological accounting, the head of this discourse is a discourse about politics.

1. *Timaeus*, Bowett Trans, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html>, 20A [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 19A [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Timaeus*, Kalkavage trans, 37D [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 37C [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The weird formatting is because I copied and pasted pictures of the Greek words. I didn’t want to have to manually type them out all the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 27D [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 27A [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. If it were possible, than defining the difference between past and present would be much tougher. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, 22B [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 23C [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Which tend to be the literate, like the Sophists or Philosophers [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, 26E [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, 27B and also 29D [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sallis, *Platonic Legacies,* 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. But where do I even start? [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Sallis, *Chronology, On Beginning in Plato’s Timaeus*, 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Timaeus*, Kalkavage trans, 26D [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Sallis, *Chronology, On Beginning in Plato’s Timaeus*, 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The irony of my choice of word here is entirely on purpose [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, 42, from 2nd sentence on [↑](#footnote-ref-20)