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Timaeus Response

Plato is giving the audience of Timaeus a creation story that not only explains how humanity came to be but why we are mortal and why the elements are the way they are, all by using logical principles and observations made of the world around him by him and his fellow Greeks. This is significant because it represents an attempt at making a creation story grounded in the logical principles of mathematics as well as in the divine.

In Timaeus, Plato does his best to explain every observable aspect of creation and why it happened. In doing so, he satisfies the creation story's main purposes of not only explaining how the world and everything in it came to be, but why this happened and why humanity exists. This explanation gives origin to what the Greeks considered the four basic elements: fire, air, earth, and water. It also explains the Golden Mean, a quantity in mathematics first studied by the Greeks. "For whenever in any three numbers, whether cube or square, there is a mean, which is to the last term what the first term is to it; and again, when the mean is to the first term as the last term is to the mean—then the mean becoming first and last, and the first and last both becoming means, they will all of them of necessity come to be the same, and having become the same with one another will be all one." He claimed that God made the world into a sphere because a sphere was the most perfect shape the Greeks knew and that God would only make a perfect and balanced universe.

To explain how the soul of the world was made, instead of just saying that God took essence and made a soul and put it in the Earth or something suitably divine, he went into great detail. God used elements of the indivisible, elements of the divisible material world, and created a third kind of “intermediate essence.” He then went into a very exact description of the ways God split and combined the different elements to the point of describing ratios like 256 to 243. His explanation of the orbits of the planets also in terms of mathematics, claiming there were seven unequal circles that had ratios of two and three and that the Sun, Mercury, and Venus moved in the same direction in the same speed, and the Moon, Saturn, Mars, and Jupiter moved in the opposite direction and in different speeds from the first three and each other, but all the speeds were in proportion, an important concept to the Greeks. He then explained time and how time was created as an image of eternity that moved according to number, which was the focal point of the philosophy of the Pythagoreans. He gives a purpose to the stars, which were made to give animals the ability to keep time. The Sun especially was explained to have been made to give the world light and to allow animals to “learn arithmetic from the revolution of the same and the like,” and night and day were created as they made the “most intelligent revolution.” The soul of each human was attached to a star and if they lived well on Earth as a man was returned to his star upon death, but if they failed at living well they would live a second life as a woman and continually be changed into a evil brute, a state that could not be overcome except by reason.

Everything in Plato’s creation story has a place and a reason that logically fits within the scheme of the Earth. This marked a shift in philosophical thought. Previously, while creation stories were generally very detailed in order to explain the various aspects of life on Earth, they

were not grounded in mathematics. In most other creation stories, the gods or God just do something and that's that. There are no Golden Means and no ratios of 256 to 243. Establishing that the Earth was created on principles of mathematics meant that the way the world worked could be explained logically instead of "Zeus did it." While it is not modern day rationalism, it was progress to be able to say that the world is made up of elements that each have certain properties that were given by a creator and that's why something works the way it does.

The reason that Plato's explanation worked well for Medieval Europeans is that gives an explanation of the world but at the same time still has a creator at the center of the explanation. If you discount the talk about the creation of the Greek gods, Timaeus basically says that there is a divine creator that created the universe to be a reflection of heaven with humans placed on Earth as reflections of the creator and everything has a purpose endowed to it by the creator. This is the basis of Christian thought as is told in the Bible, that God created the universe and made humans in his image, so on and so forth. The explanations Plato gave worked well for the people of Europe until, starting in the Renaissance, new scientific discoveries started to be made that started to disprove the claims made by Plato and others.

Timaeus was significant because it marked a shift in thought and a start of examining the world for scientific explanations of aspects of the universe. The explanation made sense because it was based in mathematical knowledge known at the time as well as the divine, and supported Christian theology that God created the universe for humanity and established good and evil. Without Timaeus, humanity may have continued to attribute everything to the gods without searching for logical explanations, and computers might not exist for me to type this essay on.