Alvaro Vallejo

NO, IT'S NOT A FICTION

In a paper published in 1971, L. Taras accepted that the burden of the proof lies with those who contend that Plato did not intend the creation of the universe to be taken literally. His strategy consisted of showing the contradictions which would follow in that case. My purpose in this paper will be to argue against the impossibility of interpreting the creation in time literally and to try to show that it is consistent with Plato's thought as expressed in the Timaeus. Nevertheless, this does not mean that every detail of the creation myth must be interpreted literally. Plato himself says that there is in us too much of the casual and random, which shows itself in our speech (34e, Comford's translation) and that we must not be surprised "if in many respects concerning many things (the gods and the generation of the universe) we prove unable to render an account at all points entirely consistent with itself and exact" (29e). It is impossible for human nature to profess absolute certainty in matters concerning the generation of the universe and we must be satisfied to reach an account no less likely than any others. But Plato sought to show, against presocratic philosophers, that the world is a product of ἐξ θεοῦ and he thought that creation in time was most coherent with this idea. Creation in time will thus constitute my fundamental concern.

1. Cherniss and L. Taras have argued against the identification of temporal and ontological priority taking the reversal of the "chronological" order of creation as a warning that any temporal sequence in the account must be a falsification. Cherniss said that οὐκ ἐστὶ, since it is intermediate between the ideas and the sensible universe (35a-b), cannot exist 'before' the sensible world either. But Plato does not say that the soul is intermediate between the ideas and the sensible universe, that is, the ordered world which he calls ἐποικία, but between the indivisible existence and the divisible one that 'becomes in bodies' out of which the Demiurge composed a third form of existence. Timaeus says


that becoming (yēvovn) existed even before Heaven came into being (52d3-4). Therefore, if soul is created, as Plato literally says, it could be subsequent to the sensible world, the yēvovn of which is eternal, and prior to the body of the universe whose ordered movements are due to the soul. I see no contradiction in this and agree with T. Robinson concerning the reason he gives for Plato’s reversal of the order of creation: it seems natural enough to proceed from the better known to the less well known, that is, from the body of the universe to its soul. Nevertheless, I believe that what is fundamental in Plato’s tenet is not the pre-creity of the creation of soul but the fiction of creation in itself, because soul and body could have been created simultaneously.

2. Another argument adduced against the literal interpretation is, the eternity of yēvovn. Plato says that all sensible things have come into being and that everything which becomes must necessarily become by the agency of some causes (28c2). Since the precosmical chaos is said to be visible (30a3), it must have a cause, but this would be a contradiction with the eternity of becoming, which existed even before the Heaven came into being (52d4). Nevertheless, I find no contradiction, if we properly understand Plato’s chaos. In my opinion the principle of causality applies also to the precosmical chaos and this does not imply that this chaos cannot be eternal. What is platonically chaos? I would describe it as a chain of events each having its cause in a preceding event without any teleological order. Platonic chaos is not a single thing which must have a cause, but a multitude of events without purposeful causality. If yēvovn is eternal and not created, this chain of events must be without a beginning, and thus it can be argued that everything that becomes has a cause even in relation to precosmical chaos, because every event in this chaos will have its cause in another event in an infinite chain of causes. Plato distinguishes two kinds of causes: those which work with intelligence to produce what is good and desirable and those which, being destitute of reason, produce their sundry effects at random and without orders (46e3-6). In precosmical chaos the former kind of cause does not exist, because the soul has not yet been created, but there would be those things that are moved by others and of necessity set yet others in motion (46e1-2). As Guthrie’s says, there was, of course, yēvovn, before the yēvovn of our worlds, but what we could not find in this eternal becoming is the existence of those self-moving causes that are essentially related to teleology. Precosmical chaos as a whole does not have any cause, because yēvovn is eternal, but every event in the state of the world before creation must be the effect of a preceding one which has set it in motion. We could even say that precosmical world is not devoid of mechanical order, though we could not find a rational plan pervading the totality of that world. Plato describes the Recipient and its motions before the action of the Demiurge and assigns different regions to the different kinds of things “before the ordered whole consisting of them came to be.” This means that there is a certain order in the precosmical chaos and that every event is the effect of a chain of mechanical causes which makes it possible even then to apply the principle of causality.

Those who interpret the creation and the Demiurge as myth are obliged to say that chaos is not to be taken literally. Thus chaos is often interpreted as some factor in the world as it exists at all times (Comford) and, from this perspective, the present state of the world must be portrayed as intermediate between absolute order and absolute disorder (Cherniss). The assumption in both cases is the identification of necessity with chaos. However, the two should not be equated, because Necessity is always present in the world whereas chaos is not. Necessity is a co-operative agent of the demiurge and it is indeed present in the world, though overruled by Reason, which persuaded her to guide the greatest part of the things that become towards what is best (48a). But chaos means the absence of teleological causality and it cannot be said to exist in the world, because the kernel of Plato’s philosophy in the Timaeus is the idea of xōn, as an ordered system that displays the victory of reason. For the non-literal reading of the Timaeus, the only coherent interpretation of chaos is the one offered by Taylor, who sees chaos as something imaginary and as description of what would be the state of things in the absence of god.

3. The problem of chaos urges us to take into account the theory of movement in the Timaeus, because those who maintain the non-literal interpretation argue that the soul is the ultimate source of all physical motion. If this is true, then chaos could be only a mythical device and not a real state of the world before the creation of the soul. To Comford, bodily motion cannot exist without a soul to cause it and is consistent with this, saying that the disorderly condition of chaos can never have existed by itself at a time before order was introduced. Cherniss did not accept Comford’s proposal of an irrational element in the World-Soul in order to explain those movements not absolutely governed by the causality of intelligence, but he also contended that Plato in the Timaeus was not giving a mechanical explanation in which heterogeneity is the sufficient cause of motion (p. 448-9). Those, like Cherniss and Taran’, who

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3 T. Robinson, Plato’s Psychology, Phoenix, suppl. vol. VIII, p. 65.
10 F.M. Comford, Plato’s Cosmology, p. 203.
11 H.P. Cherniss, Aristotle’s criticism of Plato and the Academy, p. 446, n.387.
12 See loco cit., p. 388.
the receptacle or between the foudre and the receptacle, the most unlikely kinds are separated from one another and the most alike are thrust together, then the contact between unequal elements could be prevented and the disorderly motions of prenominal "matter" would have come to an end and as a result of the very effects that these motions produced on the "receptacle". As Taylor puts it, "that is, contact is prevented by the cessation of a certain type that is present in particles of a different shape". In this context, Plato says that the receptacle of the whole, being round and naturally tending to come together upon itself (58a) encompasses the four kinds of elements, making no empty place for the separation of unequal elements. To those who defend the non-literal reading, the receptacle necessarily means "the circular revolution of the universe" and thus the motion of the Demiurge in an ordered world would be essential for the continuity of aytos. But it is by no means necessary to interpret the receptacle as the revolution of the whole. The receptacle can mean "revolution" as well as "circumference". I think that here all the emphasis is given to kuchorexw; and, as it has been pointed out by others, that all that is needed is the circumference of the whole so that the particles are enclosed in it without the possibility of leaving an infinite empty space for unequal elements to disperse, in which case heterogeneity would not preserve a ceaseless movement, because we would not have the contact between unequal elements. It is true that in 33b kuchorexw refers to a characteristic of the formed world and it is natural to suppose that here (58a) it also refers to the formed world, but the most important thing considered under this characteristic of kuchorexw is the insistence of void, and for this no circular movement is necessarily presupposed. If Plato is not thinking of the receptacle in the prenominal world at 58a, nevertheless, it is also natural to suppose that there is no void in the prenominal world either and space could be round, as R. Mohr sustained in his interpretation of the passage. Thus, even if Plato is not, as is most probable, thinking of the movements of the receptacle as described in 52c-53a, this characteristic would have to be attributed to aytos. In any case, Plato never says in the Timaeus that the soul or the demiurgic activity is the ultimate cause of movement, so it makes a concerted effort to explain movement by means of mere physical heterogeneity. I see no contradiction in the literal reading on this basis, either.

4. In relation to the theory of movement, another argument against the literal reading is the generated character attributed to the soul. In Phaedrus 245d the soul is said to be immortal, because it is dyfnevou, but, although it is difficult to reconcile what Plato says in the Timaeus with the doctrine expounded in the Phaedrus, it must be remembered that, in the Laws (892c) the soul is ev meio-


14 L. Torin, loco cit., p. 387.
5. Another argument adduced against the literal interpretation is the supposed incompatibility of the creation with the immutability of god. Chersonesus20 and Tarchu21 reminded us of Timaeus 42e 5-6, where it is said that after creation the demiurge ἐπενε γένεσιν καὶ εἰς τόποις πρόχειρος ἐγένετο. Does this mean that god must be immutable or simply that he left the other operations to the created gods? In this context it probably means the latter, but in the other case the question is whether the creation is incompatible with the immutability of god as stated in Republic 381c. We should distinguish between a change which affects the form of the gods (μορφές) and the actions that follow from their own nature. Plato says there that σὸς is not the cause of all things, but only of the gods (τιμήσεις), but does not say that any kind of action implies a change in the form of god. In Laws 885b, we see one of the reasons for irrept is the belief that god is indifferent to the destiny of mankind. This means that for Plato the immutability of god is compatible with any action that is coherent with his nature. In the platonic system, it is even easier to understand a creation in time than in Christian theology, because, in the former, god does not create being. If being, space and becoming are different from the Demiurge, the creation act is necessary and can take place in time. On the contrary, if space were not independent of god, it could never have been in a state of chaos and chaos could only be a mythical device.

6. Other arguments adduced against the literal interpretation are Timaeus' saying that elime came into being together with the heavens (38b) and the academic tradition. In relation to the first of these arguments, several scholars have shown the plausibility of a precosmical time22. Plato says, as is well known, (A) that Elime came into being together with the heavens (38b) and (B) that there were no days and nights, months and years, before the heavens came into being (38b). In my opinion, the meaning of the first proposition (A) is elucidated by the second one (B). It is evident that before the corresponding movements which originate days and nights, months and years, we cannot have the time which is measured in terms of these. I think that R. Mohr is right when he distinguishes, as others have done, between relatively separate temporal comparisons of earlier and later, before and after23, which could be possible in the precosmical world, and those other judgements of past, present, and future made by reference to a celestial clock, which are only possible in an ordered world or στηρικτικός2.

About the academic tradition, we have, against the opinion of Xenocrates and Speusippus, the criticism of Aristotle in De Caelo that presupposes the literal reading, and therefore we could say that on this point our authorities are divided.

traditional order of composition (Phaedrus, Timaeus, Laws) is the right one. See A. Vallejo Campos, "Las Leyes, el Timaeus y la teoría del movimiento", Mérito o JX (1996), p. 31-42.

20 H.E. Chersonesus, opus cit., p. 425.


22 C.f. E.M. Cerf, Plato's Cosmology, p.147 n.1.


24 C.f. R. Mohr, Plato's Cosmology, p. 65.
It seems as if the attack by Aristotle in his dialogue On Philosophy had stirred an attempt of defence (辩论) in the Academy. According to Philo (De immortalitate mundi III, 10-11), Aristotle had said that the world is ungenerated and imperishable and convicted of grave ungodliness those who maintained the opposite... (J. Barnes and G. Lawrence translation). These criticisms of Aristotle could have prompted an attempt to interpret the creation myths as motivated by instructional purposes (διδακτικής ἔργου, De Caelo 280a), which he criticizes in De Caelo. Nevertheless, these two arguments do not seem to disallow a literal reading of the creation act in the Timaeus.

Giovanni Reale

PLATO'S DOCTRINE OF THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE TIMAEUS

1. The Obstacles Posed by the Timaeus for Modern Readers

Plato's Timaeus is a very complex text. In addition to the metaphysical groundwork and axioms it offers, we find discussions of an almost encyclopedic range of issues in the particular sciences, from mathematics to natural science: cosmology, physics, chemistry, anthropology and medicine. For this reason, modern men encounter severe obstacles in knowing how to approach it.

Nevertheless, the history of the dialogue's reception is of considerable interest. Up until the humanistic revival of the Renaissance, the Timaeus was Plato's most influential work. On the other hand, in modern times, but with the exception of the Romantic period, it has been thought even by those who continue to read Plato's other writings to be a less important and challenging work. Even specialists in ancient thought have taken less interest in it. Apart from the commentaries by A. J. Ayer, by F. M. Cornford, and, recently re-issued, by L. Briassou, there are very few works of such particular note as to be required reading.

What has happened?
There are explanations plenty.

In the first place, we have to take into account the way in which science has been conceived in the period since the intellectual revolution which marks the

1 We may recall that, in the School of Athens, Raphael puts the Timaeus under Plato's arm, thus indicating the way in which, at that time, the work was taken to be his most important.
2 In his youth, F. W. J. Schelling wrote a commentary on the Timaeus (1794), which has only recently been edited by H. Buchner for Frommann-Holzboog of Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt.