

Alvaro Vallejo

NO, IT'S NOT A FICTION

In a paper published in 1971, L. Tarán 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 literally¹. 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» (34c, Cornford'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» (29c). 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 other». But Plato sought to show, against presocratic philosophers, that the world is a product of τέχνη 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. Tarán² 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 «soul, 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 οὐρανός, 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

¹ Cfr. L. Tarán, «The Creation Myth in Plato's *Timaeus*», *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. by J.P. Anton with G.L. Kustas, 2nd. ed., New York, 1971, p. 374.

² H. Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy*, vol. I, New York, 1972 (1944), p. 424; L. Tarán, *opus cit.*, p. 375.

that becoming (γένεσις) 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 γένεσις 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»³, 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 priority of the creation of soul but the *factum* 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 γένεσις⁴. Plato says that all sensible things have come into being and that everything «which becomes must necessarily become by the agency of some cause» (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 platonic 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 γένεσις 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 «that 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 order» (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 Guthrie⁵ says, «there was, of course, γένεσις before the γένεσις of our world», 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 γένεσις 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

³ T. Robinson, *Plato's Psychology*, Phoenix, suppl. vol. VIII, p. 65.

⁴ Cfr. Cherniss, *opus cit.*, p. 420 and L. Tarán, *opus cit.*, p. 382-4.

⁵ Cfr. W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. V, Cambridge, 1979, p. 263 n.2.

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» (Cornford) and, from this perspective, the present state of world must be portrayed as «intermediate between absolute order and absolute disorder» (Cherniss)⁶. The assumption in both cases is the identification of necessity with chaos⁷. 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 κόσμος 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 «a description of what would be the state of things» in the absence of god⁸.

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 soul⁹. To Cornford, «bodily motion cannot exist without a soul to cause it»¹⁰ 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». Cherniss¹¹ did not accept Cornford'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 Tarán¹², who

⁶ Cfr. H. Cherniss, *opus cit.*, p. 422, 444, and F.M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, London, 1966, p. 176.

⁷ Cfr. J.S. Clegg, «Plato's Vision of Chaos», *Classical Quarterly*, 1976, 52-61, p. 53 argues against the identification of chaos with Necessity.

⁸ Cfr. A.E. Taylor, *A Commentary of Plato's Timaeus*, N. York-London, 1987 (1928), p. 80 and 352.

⁹ Among those who maintain the non-literal reading and the theory that soul is the ultimate cause of movement even in the *Timaeus* are: Cornford, *opus cit.*, p. 203; Cherniss, *opus cit.*, p. 444-450 and «The Sources of Evil according to Plato», *Plato: a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by G. Vlastos, New York, 1971, vol. II, p. 247 and 252 f.; Tarán, *locus cit.*, p. 384-388; E. Ostenfeld, «Disorderly motion in the *Timaeus*», *Classica et Mediaevalia*, 1968-9, p. 22-26.

¹⁰ F.M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, p. 203.

¹¹ H.F. Cherniss, *Aristotle's criticism of Plato and the Academy*, p. 446, n.387.

¹² See *locus cit.*, p. 388.

uphold this thesis stress the importance of two passages above all: 46d-e, where Plato distinguishes two kinds of causality; and 58a, where it is said that the περίοδος of the whole preserves the heterogeneity of the elements and makes possible the endlessness of movement. Let us consider these passages in the light of the non-literal reading to identify any contradiction.

In 46e, as we have seen, Plato speaks of two kinds of causality: firstly, «the causation that belongs to the intelligent nature» and secondly «that which belongs to things that are moved by others and of necessity set yet others in motion» (46d-e). I believe that the main object of Plato in this text is to distinguish teleological from mechanical or material causality. The former is due to intelligence and produces «what is good and desirable» (46e); the latter, which must be considered merely as συναρτία in an ordered world, produces their effects «at random and without order». In the precosmic chaos it might be possible to find only the second kind of causality¹³, because Plato says that, before the ordered world, everything was «without proportion or measure» (53a). *Teleology means causality of intelligence and this presupposes a self-moving entity, that is, a soul whose movements are caused by its own aims.* But this does not mean that in any possible world the secondary causality of purely mechanical things must be founded on the causality of the soul. Material things belong to these sort of causes “that are moved by others and of necessity set yet others in motion” and “of necessity” means that in this transmission of movement there is no teleological motive, but Plato never says in the *Timaeus* that this kind of causality must be founded on the soul as the ultimate cause of all movements. In an ordered world, the secondary causes are subservient to rational or teleological causality, but, in the precosmic chaos, γένεσις is eternal and we could not find a first cause in an infinite series of things that move and are moved by others. I see no contradiction in this, either, if we consider the eternity attributed by Plato to γένεσις.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to reconcile what Plato says in the *Timaeus* with the doctrine of movement as it is expounded in the *Phaedrus* (245c-246a) and *Laws* (cf. 894b-896b). I shall deal with this below. However, is the theory of movement the only aspect of Plato's philosophy where we can find discrepancies and different solutions or simply different points of view in the dialogues?

Plato says that «motion will never exist in a state of homogeneity» (57e), and that heterogeneity is preserved by the inequality of the particles; but the question is whether heterogeneity is the necessary or the sufficient cause of motion. Plato makes, I believe, a sincere effort to explain movement in the precosmic world on a purely mechanical basis and, speaking of the movements of the δυνάμεις in the receptacle, he says that «the different kinds (the ἕχνη of the elements) came to have different regions, even before the ordered world consisting of them came to be» (53a). If, as a result of the movements that occur in

¹³ I do not see any textual case for a distinction between συναρτία and the two kinds of causality distinguished in 46e, as Skemp tries to establish. Cf. J.B. Skemp, “Disorderly Motions Again”, *Aristotle on Nature and Living Things*, Pittsburg, Bristol Classical Press, 1985, p. 297.

the receptacle or between the δυνάμεις 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 precosmic ‘matter’ would have come to an end as a result of the very effects that these motions produced on the ‘receptacle’»¹⁴. As Taylor puts it, «all that is needed to prevent the cessation of γένεσις is that no set of particles should be able to drift indefinitely far from the neighbourhood of other sets of particles of a different shape»¹⁵. In this context, Plato says that «the περίοδος of the whole», «being round and naturally tending to come together upon itself» (58a) encompasses the four kinds and leaves no empty place for the separation of unequal elements. To those who defend the non-literal reading, περίοδος necessarily means “the circular revolution of the universe”¹⁶ and thus the action of the Demiurge in an ordered world would be essential for the continuity of γένεσις. But it is by no means necessary to interpret περίοδος as the revolution of the whole. Περίοδος can mean “revolution” as well as “circumference”. I think that here all the emphasis is given to κυκλοτερής and, as has been pointed out by others, 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 κυκλοτερής 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 the οὐρανός is the inexistence of void, and for this no circular movement is necessarily presupposed. If Plato is not thinking of the receptacle in the precosmic world at 58a, nevertheless, it is also natural to suppose that there is no void in the precosmic world either and space could be round, as R. Mohr sustained in his interpretation of this passage¹⁷. Thus, even if Plato is not, as is most probable, thinking of the movements of the receptacle as described in 52e-53a, this characteristic would have to be attributed to χώρα. In any case, Plato never says in the *Timaeus* that soul or the demiurgic activity is the ultimate cause of movement and he 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 ἀγέννητον, 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 ἐν πρό-

¹⁴ L. Tarán, *locus cit.*, p. 387.

¹⁵ Cf. A.E. Taylor, *opus cit.*, p. 399.

¹⁶ Cf. Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism...*, p. 449 and Tarán, *locus cit.*, p. 387.

¹⁷ Cf. R. Mohr, “The Mechanism of Flux in Plato's *Timaeus*”, *Apeiron*, XIV (1980), p. 103.

τοὺς γεγεννημένῃ¹⁸, and this means that Plato is not perfectly consistent about the ἀγένητον character of soul. In the *Laws*, Plato is trying to argue against those who hold that the material elements are the only genuine realities and that god, art and law are only derivative products of convention. Against a mechanistic theory of nature, he wants to prove the reality of his teleological view by trying to demonstrate the priority of movement originated by the soul. However, as in the *Timaeus*, the soul has to be «more ancient than body» (892c) and the material elements like earth, water, air and fire, which are also in the *Timaeus* posterior to soul. There is no contradiction at this point between the *Timaeus* and *Laws*, but it is true that, in the latter, Plato seems to overlook the distinction between a purely mechanical precosmical state of affairs and an ordered world. He discusses the problem of movement only in the perspective of an ordered cosmos and disregards the merely mechanical principle of heterogeneity adduced as cause of movement in the *Timaeus*. Vlastos advanced an explanation for this in 1939 which he later (1964) renounced and, although I think that it was quite sound, this question will probably remain one of the riddles of Platonic research. On the interpretation proposed by Vlastos, as is well known, «that the soul is πρῶτον γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς αἴτιον (*Laws* 891e) merely denotes the supremacy of the soul's teleological action within the created universe»¹⁹. The apparent contradiction of the *Timaeus*, on one hand, and the *Phaedrus* and *Laws*, on the other, seems the reason why Aristotle says that Plato «sometimes declares the soul the ἀρχή of motion» (*Metaph.* 1071a). The only way of escaping the contradiction between the two divergent concepts of soul seems to me the one proposed by Hackforth when he said that we may fairly take Plato to mean «that soul, being the necessary presupposition of all movement that occurs in the universe, is coeval with the universe»²⁰. In this sense, when he says in the *Laws* (895a) that, in a series of changes, there must be a first thing which moves itself, I would be tempted to understand that he means «in a series of changes that do have a beginning», that is, in an ordered world. The soul would have to be the starting point of a teleological movement that results in an ordered world, but, if the precosmical γένεσις is eternal, as it seems to be in the *Timaeus*, it would not be necessarily such a starting point of movement based on a thing that moves itself. Indeed, it is very difficult to harmonize the theory of movement and soul in the *Phaedrus* and *Laws* with the *Timaeus*²¹, but it cannot be said that the latter contradicts itself on the grounds of a literal reading.

¹⁸ Cfr. also *Laws* 894d and 896b and W.K.C. Guthrie, *opus cit.*, p. 366-7.

¹⁹ Cfr. G. Vlastos, «The Disorderly Motion in the *Timaeus*», in *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics*, ed. by R.E. Allen, London, 1965, p.397 (orig. 1939).

²⁰ Cfr. R. Hackforth, «Plato's Cosmogony», *Classical Quarterly*, 1959, p. 21.

²¹ T. Robinson tried to escape the contradiction by altering the traditional dating (*Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, *Laws*) as was proposed by Owen; but this strategy, as he recognizes, «is a suasion rather than an argument». Cfr. *Plato's Psychology*, p.103-4. See also Easterling, «Causation in the *Timaeus* and *Laws X*», *Eranos*, 65 (1967), p. 25-38. In my opinion, it is possible to reconcile the *Timaeus* with the *Laws* but not with the *Phaedrus*, because in the latter the soul is said to be ἀγένητον (245d). Therefore, I believe that the

5. Another argument adduced against the literal interpretation is the supposed incompatibility of the creation with the immutability of god. Cherniss²² and Tarán²³ remind us of *Timaeus* 42e 5-6, where it is said that after creation the demiurge ἔμενε ἐν τῷ ἑαυτοῦ κατὰ τρόπον ἦθει. Does this mean that god must be immutable or simply that he left the other operations to the created gods²⁴? 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 would affect the form of the gods (μορφή) and the actions that follow from their own nature. Plato says there that «god is not the cause of all things, but only of the good» (*Rep.* 380c), but does not say that any kind of action implies a change in the form of god. In *Laws* 885b, we see that one of the reasons for impiety 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 «time came into being together with the heaven» (38b) and the academic tradition. In relation to the first of these arguments, several scholars have shown the plausibility of a precosmical time²⁵. Plato says, as is well known, (A) that «Time came into being together with the heaven» (38b) and (B) that «there were no days and nights, months and years, before the heaven came into being» (37e). 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 «merely relative temporal comparisons of earlier and later, before and after»²⁶, 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 οὐρανός.

About the academic tradition, we have, against the opinion of Xenocrates and Speusipus, 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 *Timeo* y la teoría del movimiento», *Méthexis* IX (1996), p. 31-42.

²² H.E. Cherniss, *opus cit.*, p. 425.

²³ L. Tarán, *locus cit.*, p. 380.

²⁴ Cfr. F.M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, p.147 n.1.

²⁵ Cfr. G. Vlastos, «Creation in the *Timaeus*: is it a fiction?», in *SPM*, p. 404-414; W.K.C. Guthrie, *opus cit.*, p. 301; J.B. Skemp, «Disorderly Motions Again», in *Aristotle on Nature and Living Things*, p. 290; R. Mohr, *Plato's Cosmology*, Leiden, 1985, p. 65-6.

²⁶ Cfr. 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 (βοήθεια) in the Academy. According to Philo (*De aeternitate 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 myth as motivated by instructional purposes (διδασκαλίας χάριν, *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 encyclopædic 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 work¹. On the other hand, in modern times, but with the exception of the Romantic period², 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. E. Taylor³, by F. M. Cornford⁴ and, recently re-issued, by L. Brisson⁵, there are very few works of such particular note as to be required reading.

What has happened?

There are explanations aplenty.

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 Canstatt.

³ *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928.

⁴ *Plato's Cosmology. The Timaeus of Plato translated with a running commentary*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1935.

⁵ *Le même et l'autre dans la structure ontologique du Timée de Platon. Un commentaire systématique du Timée de Platon*, Paris, 1974, Sanct Augustin, 1995.