What lies ahead

To introduce the *Timaeus* briefly, I cannot do better than quote an excellent summary by R. B. Rutherford:[1]

> The *Timaeus* falls into three main parts, the first two of which are continuous. The first is an introductory exchange in which Socrates greets three friends – Timaeus, Critias and Hermocrates – and recalls how they met the previous day and considered in theoretical terms the social and economic structure of an ideal society: there are clear reminiscences of the *Republic*, but it is also obvious that much that was essential to that society is ignored. Socrates expresses the desire to see this ideal state in action, and the second part of the dialogue consists of a speech by Critias in which he declares that such a society can in fact be exemplified in early Athenian history, known from records of a forgotten age which were found by his ancestor Solon in Egypt. He whets the appetite of the company with the beginnings of his narrative, which will narrate the great war between Athens and the lost island of Atlantis; this topic, however, is deferred to the *Critias*, already anticipated as the second work of a trilogy. Today, Timaeus, represented as a Pythagorean[2] from Italian Locri, will give an exposition of something older and perhaps more magnificent – an account of the creation of the universe. Timaeus' speech occupies the third and by far the longest part of the work, and can be further subdivided into sections. In brief, it describes the shape and structure of the cosmos, narrates in 'mythical' form the deliberate designing of it and all that it contains by a divine 'demiurge' (craftsman), and proceeds to describe in some detail its motion, its elements, the stars and planets (conceived as divine), and the living creatures, above all man, which have been created to inhabit the earth, placed at its centre.[3]

And:

> The main speech in the *Timaeus* embraces an extraordinary range of subject matter and style, ranging from macrocosm to microcosm, from the cosmically great to the clinically minute: an example of the former might be the passage describing Time

[1] For a survey of scholarly questions about the *Timaeus*, together with close summaries of each of the sections and a useful analytical table of contents, see Zeyl, 2000, xiii–xcv.
[2] I should warn that this book will not be discussing, as such, any Pythagorean aspect of Timaeus.
[3] Rutherford, 1995, 286.

as the likeness or mirror-image of Eternity (37c–8c), of the latter the bizarrely technical discussion of the process of taste (e.g. 65b–6c). In this speech Plato draws on many fields which were evolving their own specialised vocabularies: mathematical astronomy, medicine, music, metallurgy to name but a few.[4]

Plato through the character Timaeus presents our rich, complex, and fascinating universe as having an origin beyond itself.[5] We are to think of the physical cosmos as made by a divine incorporeal intelligence in accordance with an eternal, incorporeal, intelligible paradigm. Although the cosmos is Timaeus's focus and his object of study, we are never allowed to lose sight of what for him is the foundational fact about it, namely its trans-natural origin. Within this framework he offers an explanation not only of how the world-order came to be and what that order consists in, but also of how we humans can reasonably hope to speculate about cosmological questions. He gives an account, too, of the existential position of human beings. He shows how they are (of course) embedded in the physical world, but also how there is more to human rational selves than that. He therefore has to show how these come to be in the physical world.

It is remarkable, in fact, how minute changes in the surface texture of Timaeus's discourse shift the reader between extra- and intra-mundane perspectives on the cosmos. To see this, first consider the many passages where the enquiry is said to be about 'the All'. Timaeus at the start is identified with such an enquiry, when the character Critias profiles him as the one among them most versed in astronomy, and most dedicated to knowing about the nature of the All (*peri phuseôs tou pantos*; 27a3–5). Timaeus himself shortly afterwards describes his task as 'producing accounts [*logous*] concerning the All' (*tou pantos*; 27c4). He will use the phrase 'the All' several times in his progress through his cosmological agenda.[6] So the investigation is to be of the physical universe considered as a whole. Such an enquiry supposes a seemingly conceivable standpoint from which the whole of the natural world could be considered: thus a standpoint located nowhere in particular within the natural world, and

[4] Rutherford, 1995, 293. See also 294–6 for an admirably clear and succinct account of the importance of the *Timaeus* for the history of ideas.

[5] Scholars today refuse, rightly, to take it for granted that any character in any of the dialogues speaks for Plato himself; see, e.g., Cooper, 1997, xxi. This applies to Timaeus too. (Indeed Taylor, 1928, 10–11, 17–19, maintained that Timaeus, far from representing the mid-fourth-century Plato, represents a fusion of Pythagoras and Empedocles from a hundred years before. For rebuttal of Taylor, see Cornford, 1935, vi–ix.) While I agree that it makes sense to consider the possibility that Timaeus does not represent Plato, there seems to be no good reason either for holding that this is so or for remaining undecided.

[6] E.g. at 30b5; 47a3; 48b8; 53a7–b1; 90e2; 92c4.

therefore perhaps in some sense positioned beyond it. (The assumption of such an extra-mundane *standpoint* does not, of course, carry with it commitment to an extra-mundane *origin* for the natural world or anything within it: the standpoint is assumed in any enquiry into nature as a whole, whether the inquirer supposes that nature does or does not exhaust reality or has no view on the question.)

But now consider the fact that Timaeus sometimes refers to the physical realm demonstratively, as '*this* All' (28c4; 29d7; 41a5).[7] This seems perfectly natural: but does it make sense, given that referring to something as 'this so and so' often implies having picked it out from other, more distant, objects of the kind, which in principle one might have picked out instead? How could there be more than one *All*, or more than one to which *we* could refer definitely?[8] But any such logical worry is irrelevant, for Timaeus's 'this' has a different force. It calls attention to the fact that the All of which Timaeus speaks does indeed environ him and his interlocutors in the dialogue-world – and also, of course, Plato and Plato's audience and readership. The referent is not simply the natural realm, but the natural realm as (*inter alia*) habitat for us who are authors and audiences of discourses about it.

Thus even while invoking the standpoint already mentioned, the one not locatable anywhere within the world, Plato does not let the audience lose sight of their own intra-mundanity. I think that the use of 'this All' and similar locutions throughout the discourse is meant to keep us constantly in touch with two connected thoughts. One is that it is a central fact *about us* that we who are inevitably bound at any given time to a given place and a given point in our personal and cultural history, and who encounter what is beyond ourselves first and most obviously through limited sense-perception, are also capable in imagination of assuming the extra-mundane standpoint that considers nature as a whole and in abstraction from all particularities of human history. Only by assuming such a standpoint can we engage in natural philosophy, and our capacity for natural philosophy is a capacity for developing the most important part of us. The second thought is that it is a central, indeed fundamental, fact *about the one and only cosmos* that it has in it beings like us. The physical realm as such would

[7] Cf. 41c3; 30c8; 92c6; 8–9. 41c3 is exceptional because it occurs in the Demiurge's speech to the other gods; thus it means 'this All that I am engaged in bringing into being'.

[8] As some of the passages just listed suggest, 'this All' may be equivalent to 'this cosmos'. Up to 31a3 it is still an open question whether *this* cosmos (i.e. orderly system) is the only one. Timaeus argues for its uniqueness at 31a3–b3. At 55c7–d6 he flatly dismisses the Democritean theory that there are infinitely many, but says that it is worth considering (although he rejects it) the suggestion that there is a small definite plurality of cosmoi, namely, five.

be horribly incomplete (not that this would ever have been possible on Timaean assumptions, as we shall see) if it did not include mortal animals able to think comprehensively about the physical realm, and about the fact that this realm includes them thinking comprehensively about it and themselves together.

Throughout this book I shall both rely on and seek to elaborate the two thoughts just articulated. At its most general, the object of the enterprise is simply to sharpen understanding of the *Timaeus*. More specifically, the focus will move between the great cornerstones of Timaean cosmology: the beginning of the world-order, with the Demiurge and the eternal paradigm from which he worked; the construction of the cosmos (body and soul) as an immortal god; the construction and destiny of rational souls in mortals; the Receptacle and the pre-cosmic condition of matter. I shall also discuss the cosmology's epistemic status, its place in the whole *Timaeus–Critias* complex, and its relationship to Platonic metaphysics. One of my main contentions will be that, its metaphysical underpinnings notwithstanding, the *Timaeus* ought to be read primarily as a cosmology and not as an introduction to Platonic metaphysics. The fundamental difference between these approaches has not, I think, always been fully understood. The discussion of the eternal paradigm in Chapter 3 is intended to clarify the difference, and Chapter 6 shows how the difference affects our understanding of the Receptacle.

The aim throughout is to identify certain major philosophical concerns that shape Plato's fashioning of the Timaean system. Quite often this will involve working out the implications of his *not* having adopted some feature or assumption of the actual account. Applying this method is not a matter of portraying Plato as psychologically deliberating between unsettled options: it is a matter of making conceptual comparisons between his actual positions and alternatives not chosen. But whereas it is mostly pointless and irrelevant to try to tap into Plato's personal psychology, it is not pointless and irrelevant to bear in mind his historical time and place in trying to reconstruct the problematic that underlies one or another portion or aspect of the *Timaeus*.

This last remark has to do with the fact that in the eyes of various interpreters, ancient and modern, one or another of the well-known Timaean cornerstones sticks out as a philosophically offensive anomaly. The most notorious case is Timaeus's depiction of the proto-historical origin of this world. Another is his depiction of the divine world-making principle as wholly separate from the world and from corporeal matter. Influential interpreters over the ages have thought it desirable or necessary

to chisel away at these elements, rounding them off, smoothing them down, or making them disappear by merging them with something else that is in the picture. It is thought that Plato could not have meant the supposedly anomalous motifs to be taken at face value: he places them in the account only for the sake of presentation, not as part of what is being seriously presented. The present study will argue *per contra* that both the proto-historical beginning and the separate Demiurge are essential to the content of the account: no less so than undisputed king-pins like the cosmic soul and the Receptacle. In each case the argument will be that subtracting the allegedly awkward element endangers the whole system. The separateness of the divine world-maker is, I shall argue, bound up with Plato's need to forge for cosmology a conception of the human person that breaks with certain implications of some of the fifth-century cosmologies. The proto-historical beginning is necessary, I shall argue, for realising a vision of the universe as both the product of a transcendent divine origin and a genuinely natural domain working in accordance with its own processes and mechanisms. There may in principle be another way to avoid sacrificing this vision, but (so I shall contend) this other way, even if genuinely viable, was not imaginably available to even the greatest mind of Plato's time.

The *Timaeus* has been many things to many thinkers over the centuries: there has been the *Timaeus* of Plotinus and that of Proclus, and so on for many others. And with respect to its more metaphysical, less empirical, aspects, philosophers down the ages have mined the *Timaeus* for perennial truth as if the source of the dialogue were an intellect beyond history – rather than an Athenian individual who lived from 428/7 to 348/7 BCE. This book is intended to be about the *Timaeus* composed by that individual philosopher.[9] Thus 'Plato's' in my title is not superfluous, although the intention behind it may of course be over-ambitious.

In what lies ahead no conclusions have been allowed to hinge on potential evidence from dialogues other than the *Timaeus–Critias*.[10] This is partly because adequate evaluation of any such evidence would have led me beyond a reasonable limit. It also seemed no bad project in itself to see how far one can get examining the *Timaeus–Critias* solely from within, so to speak. Thus I have not attempted to establish any features of the Timaean account by inference from trends of Plato's thought appearing in other dialogues or other late dialogues. Such inferences require decisions on

[9] This point will also be relevant to the interpretations of Critias's story: see Chapter 5.
[10] I have, however, occasionally pointed to passages in other dialogues for the sake of comparison, usually contrastive, with features of the *Timaeus–Critias* that can be verified independently.

difficult and often indeed scarcely decidable questions such as whether a given pattern or habit of thought is in fact discernible elsewhere to the exclusion of contrary patterns, or whether some pattern found in one dialogue can be assumed to carry over to another. So, for example, the question of the separateness or not of the Timaean world-making intelligence will not be allowed to depend on parallels either way in the *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, *Philebus*, *Statesman*, or *Laws*, but will be discussed entirely with reference to implications for the Timaean account.

CHAPTER 1

The separateness of the Demiurge

1.1 WORLD-MAKING: MATERIALS, USER, AND PRODUCT

In this opening chapter I want to look at how Plato puts in place one of the metaphysical elements behind the cosmology. In a very deliberate way he gets the reader of the *Timaeus* to see our natural world, this orderly cosmos,[1] as distinct and metaphysically *separate* from its origin. I shall particularly focus on the separateness, in Plato's presentation, of the world-making god from the cosmos he constructs.[2]

Some have thought that this separateness is one of those aspects of the account that Plato would not (or could not) have meant philosophical readers to take seriously – or, as is often said, 'literally'.[3] This is the inference of interpreters who, for one or another reason, begin by assuming that the rational view for Plato to have held would be one on which the divine world-making principle is not separate. The same conclusion would be drawn if the image of a separate Demiurge were simply to strike one as too childish to be meant seriously by a great philosopher. My approach, however, takes the opposite course. It starts by accepting at face value the account Plato has given, and then attempts to understand why he wanted a Demiurge separate from the world.

[1] Throughout this book I use 'world' and 'cosmos' so as to imply a single physical order or system. Thus the as yet disorderly materials in their pre-cosmic state do not constitute a *world* in this sense. Again in this sense, it is a logically open question whether all that is physically actual makes up a world. I use 'physical universe' and 'physical realm' to denote all that is physically actual. Not bare analysis of the word '*kosmos*' but considerations of perfection lead Timaeus to the conclusion that *this* cosmos contains the totality of the corporeal materials, and therefore is the unique cosmos, not one of many as the atomists held (32c5–33b1; cf. 31a2–b3).

[2] The other element 'separate' from the world is, of course, the intelligible cosmic paradigm, which I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3. I shall have little to say on whether the paradigm is or is not separate from the Demiurge.

[3] E.g. Archer-Hind, 1888, 38–40; Cornford, 1935, 38; 197. Carone, 2005, ch. 2, has a vigorous and thoughtful defence of the view. For some arguments to the contrary, see Robinson, 1993.

As we have seen, Timaeus refers to his mighty subject as 'the All' and 'this All'. These designations prepare us for the thought that if the order of nature around us is to be accounted for at all, it must be accounted for as a whole. That it cannot be accounted for at all is an option which Plato in the *Timaeus* never considers. Another possibility, that it is self-explanatory and self-supporting, he vigorously dismisses. He maintains that whatever can be perceived by sight and touch, including in this category even this entire cosmos,[4] is not ultimate; strictly, objects of sense cannot be said to be but at most to have become, or to occur in a condition of becoming; but that entails that they have been caused (28b6–c3). Thus we begin to be led towards the doctrine of a trans-natural origin for the world.

The lead comes from the platitudinous principle that a cause is prior to and different from the things which it is invoked to explain, together with the assumption that what has to be explained is the entire order of nature in which we live. Still, something more than these premisses is needed to bring us to the high Platonic metaphysics (as traditionally understood) according to which the cause of the world is separate or absolutely incorporeal. Something is needed to fend off the suggestion that the present order of nature originated by evolving out of a primitive, formless, ancestral condition that differed from what we have today by being, for example, hazy and indeterminate, or by being massed together without arrangement at any level of largeness or smallness, or by consisting of a vast indiscriminate scatter of minute things. The task of cosmology is to explain the order of nature; but an original state of things along one of the lines just sketched is sufficiently different in character from the *explanandum* to satisfy the platitudinous principle. Hence, for all that has been said, such an original state of things may have been the source from which the cosmos arose.

Plato blocks off this entire direction of explanation by setting aside the possibility that any such primitive materials or matter-like things could by themselves have evolved into the order that exists today. He does this by displaying how, at the beginning of things, 'everything that was visible' was in disorderly motion until the Demiurge 'took it over [*paralabôn*] and led it from disorder to order' (30a2–6; cf. 68e3). In other words, left to themselves the visibles would have continued moving without rhyme or reason. Their change into an ordered condition depended on the formative

[4] Plato need not be accused here of the fallacy of inferring from parts to the whole. Arguably, it is built into the notions of seeing and touching that we see/touch by seeing/touching a proper part of the object; this is reflected in the fact that the grammatical objects of the Greek *aisthanesthai* ('perceive') and *haptesthai* ('touch') are in the genitive.

intervention of a principle of a completely different type, namely divine Intelligence.[5]

This doctrine rests on Plato's fundamental tenet that this cosmos is as good, beautiful, and orderly as any empirical entity could be. The tenet is not the conclusion of an argument: it is something the denial of which divine law (*themis*) forbids us even to express (29a4). (Thus Plato could not attempt to establish it by a *reductio* proof.) Clearly this axiom is, to put it mildly, a necessary truth. Consequently, the cause that brought this cosmos into being must be of a sort that could from the beginning have been *reliably* counted upon to produce what is as good and beautiful as possible. No matter what the circumstances of the cause and its causative activity – vary these mentally as you wish – the cause will track whatever is the best and most beautiful effect.[6] Thus the cause must be such as to produce what is good and beautiful for its own sake: not as an accidental by-product, nor as a means to some quite different kind of purpose that conceivably could have been reached by-passing the beautiful and good.

It is, of course, an additional assumption that the corporeal materials of the cosmos – whether they are thought of as still present and constituting it, or as superseded because of having turned into it – were not themselves invested with world-making intelligence. On Timaeus's account, they cannot begin to be relied on by themselves to come up with a supremely good and beautiful universe, or on their own to behave as if they appreciated the value of such an entity by producing it for its own sake. For instance, at 46d4 he says that since they are inanimate, they are incapable of reason and intelligence.

Thus the scheme assumes and conveys a stark contrast and separation between the intelligent formative cause and the materials. It thereby conveys an equally stark contrast and separation between the empirical cosmos, and the formative cause. For we have three functionally related factors: *cause*, *product*, and *materials*, the cause being maker of the product and user of the materials. Notice how the presence in this picture of *materials used by a separate user* safeguards the separateness of maker and product. For suppose the cause were not a user of separate materials, but instead gave rise to the product by itself or from itself or immediately. In that case it would be natural and reasonable to say one of two things: either the cause-entity *has evolved into* what we were calling the product, so that in fact there is a single

[5] On whether to take this proto-historical change literally, see Ch. 7; also the preliminary discussion in this chapter, section 1.3.

[6] Cf. Johansen, 2004, 69–79, on the themes of this and the next paragraph.

continuous entity of which these two are successive stages; or the cause-entity *constitutes* the product. Thus in one of two ways there is a relation between cause and product that approximates identity, in the case where the cause is such as to cause without using separate materials. By contrast, when the cause is such as uses separate materials from which to make the product, the presence of those materials in the product establishes the product too as plainly separate from the cause. The matter which the cause 'takes over' and uses has the attribute of *being sharply distinct from the cause*; and this attribute of the matter (unlike the primal unorderedness) is inherited by the product.[7]

We should consider this picture in relation to the Greek philosophical background. In that culture it was possible to speculate – people had speculated – that the present natural order is due to one or another intelligent material principle that has evolved into it or that constitutes it.[8] Now, if in this same culture there also arises (for whatever reason) a very different kind of theory, one that sees the natural order as separate from its cause, this would still have something important in common with the types of theory just sketched. For the idea of the material principle is essential to the new sort of theory too. But now it becomes the idea of matter *used* by something distinct. And so the new theory is inevitably triadic, since as well as (*A*) the using cause and (*B*) the result or product, there must also be (*C*) the matter used. Given that *C* turns into *B*, the separateness of *A* from *C* ensures the separateness of *A* from *B*. And: given that *C* turns into *B*, the separateness of *A* from *C* is, I think, also necessary for the separateness of *A* from *B*. Make *A* the cause identical with the matter *C*, or make *A* an aspect of *C*, and it will be impossible not to see *B* as a continuation of or as consisting of *AC*, hence as not separate from *AC* and *A*.

But let us now contrast this triadic picture of *user*, *used*, and *product*, with a very different conception of the divine origination of the world: the idea of creation *ex nihilo*, which has its roots in the two creation-stories in the book of Genesis.[9] Creation *ex nihilo* involves just two things, the world and its divine creator. It is worth asking: what is it about this conception that makes coherently thinkable its simple dyadic contrast between creator and world? Here the creator *both* radically differs from the world and anything worldly *and* produces a world without mediation of matter sharply distinct from

[7] This paragraph does not, of course, pretend to sketch a complete taxonomy of ancient Greek cosmogonic schemata.
[8] E.g. Heraclitus and Diogenes of Apollonia (constitution); Empedocles (evolution).
[9] Genesis chs. 1–2.