CHAPTER 1

Demiurgy and other approaches to world-generation

The theoretical background

Speculation on world-generation has existed as long as humanity has been capable of rational thought. Indeed, if one considers the existence of various cosmological myths spanning different cultures, it precedes the existence of any sort of 'scientific methodology'. The search for an explanation of the generation of the world can be found both at the beginning of Greek science and philosophy in the speculations of the pre-Socratics, and in early Greek literature, exemplified by Hesiod's *Theogony*. The present study examines the distinctly Platonic concept of demiurgy and its influence five to seven centuries after the dialogue in which it first appeared was composed. My main approach is diachronic: I firstly analyse Plato's concept of the Demiurge as expressed in the *Timaeus*, and the interpretation of the dialogue by Aristotle, the Old Academy and modern commentators (Chapter 2). I also consider the principal philosophical problems which Plato bequeathed to his successors, before turning to the chief period under discussion, the first to third centuries AD (Chapters 3–9). This allows the principal metaphysical challenges posed by the *Timaeus* to be identified before considering the responses of subsequent interpreters. My policy throughout has been to structure the discussion around individual texts, rather than an intra-traditional organisation adopting a more thematic approach. This allows greater consideration of the aims of the text and the context in which it was composed than would otherwise be possible. A thematic approach might have a potentially distorting effect by not adequately evaluating the reliability of textual transmission (Numenius' fragments and Origen's *Peri Archôn* are good examples) or obscuring the nature of a work. (In the case of the *De Iside et Osiride*, for example, it is important to note that Plutarch's comments are made in the context of an exegesis of Egyptian myth.)

It is fitting, though, firstly to elaborate the theoretical framework of the study here. In spite of Baltes' *Die Weltentstehung des platonischen Timaios nach den antiken Interpreten* (1976)[1] and the research of Jan Opsomer and Franco Ferrari, there is an issue of whether demiurgy can be said to exist as a concept or whether we are simply dealing with unrelated and independent speculations relating to the generation of the cosmos, particularly since the Demiurge disappears from view under Plato's successors. The first task facing us is to demonstrate that it is possible to trace the influence of the *Timaeus* upon concepts of world-generation, and to suggest the reasons underlying its return to popularity during the first to third centuries AD.

Demiurgy can be described as world-generation via the ordering of pre-existent matter by an entity, sometimes represented as endowed with only limited abilities, according to some sort of model, so that the activity is generally regarded as intellective, as opposed to the *creatio ex nihilo* envisaged in the Judaeo–Christian concept of creation, where God creates simply by willing it to happen. There are naturally some complexities in attempting to delineate both approaches to world-generation, which shall be dealt with later. I further contend that there are a range of subdivisions of demiurgy, depending on the sect by which, and the period in which, they were applied, even if historically dependent upon each other and all ultimately stemming from Plato's myth in the *Timaeus*. So, for example, Neoplatonic demiurgy differs from its Middle Platonist counterpart in positing multiple demiurges, which function within triads. These demiurges are assigned a highly circumscribed role, such as responsibility for partial or universal demiurgy at the encosmic or hypercosmic level. Even if this can be viewed as simply the development of already existent trends, it differs from what is found in Middle Platonist philosophers, since the system of world-generation posited by Plotinus is one of 'procession' and 'return'. So the One does not generate as the result of conscious activity, in the same way that the Demiurge does, but rather overflows, producing the next ontological level, which orders itself in response to the One above. Similarly, the Gnostic conception differs in regarding the Demiurge as either evil or ignorant and placing him in opposition to the First Principle. In Numenius, by contrast, the Demiurge collaborates with the First Principle. Admittedly, the Gnostic version is in many ways the ultimate development of Numenius' insistence on a distinction between the

[1] Baltes and Dörrie also collected and commented upon relevant Bausteine: especially relevant in this context are Bausteine 125–35 on the Theory of Forms, Bausteine 136–45 (the generation of the world) and Bausteine 146–50 (the elements) in Dörrie and Baltes 1998 and Baustein 159 (the generation of soul) in Dörrie and Baltes 2002.

First God, who is the First Principle and the Second God, who is the Demiurge.

The situation is further complicated by the appropriation of aspects of demiurgy by members of the Judaeo–Christian tradition as a mechanism for providing a 'scientific' exegesis of the creational account of *Genesis*. The two most notable proponents are Philo and Origen, although St Basil is also influenced by demiurgy in his *Hexaemeron* and he, like Calcidius in his great commentary on the *Timaeus*, is more heavily influenced by the Middle Platonist variant, rather than by Neoplatonism.[2] Since a dichotomy even between Judaeo–Christian creation and Platonic demiurgy has not been observed, how then do we set about defining the concept?

The first question is the issue of terminology. The noun *demiourgos*, 'craftsman', and the verb *demiourgein*, 'to labour like a craftsman', are both frequently used by thinkers influenced by this concept. St Basil describes the world as *demiourgia* or craftsmanship. Since this term before Plato would have been somewhat strange to use in reference to God, we can identify in such terminology the influence of the *Timaeus*. This does not help with our definition, since it could be argued that Plato's influence merely helped to develop a common language, without necessarily referring to an identical concept, and furthermore that this had simply become part of the philosophical heritage of the period, rather than as the result of any more extensive legacy. Indeed not all accounts which are influenced by demiurgy refer to their instrumental cause as a Demiurge. Numenius clearly posits a demiurgic figure, even though he refers to him as a Second God. Philo's demiurgic entity is called the *Logos* and Origen's instrumental cause is the Son-*Logos* (although he applies the title of 'Demiurge' to the Father and describes the Son as the 'immediate Demiurge'). Calcidius also never uses the Latin loan-word *demiurgus* to translate the Greek *demiourgos* and in both his translation and his commentary prefers to use words like *opifex* or *fabricator*. Using the imagery of craftsmanship to represent a divine entity when describing world-generation might seem like a more promising definition. That runs into difficulties when one considers that God in the creation accounts of *Genesis* (*Gen.* 1:1–2:4a and *Gen.* 2:4b*ff*) is described as a potter or builder and clearly we are not dealing with either the ordering of pre-existent matter or a text influenced by the *Timaeus*.

In spite of this, analysis of the texts reveals a shared heritage, not just amongst Middle Platonist thinkers, but even in the Christian and

[2] St Basil uses the demiurgic image to highlight God's sympathy for artisans, since He is one too and presents the Son as the demiurgic power, while the Father is the final cause, much like Origen, even if elsewhere in the *Hexaemeron* he adopts an anti-philosophical stance. See O'Brien, C. S.: 2011.

Gnostic traditions. However, beyond stating that the Demiurge performs the intellective activity of ordering matter, which is pre-existent, according to a model which is also pre-existent and that this ordering takes place on rational lines, i.e. according to geometric or mathematical principles, there is no coherent system of demiurgy. What can be demonstrated is that the thinkers surveyed here are influenced by the *Timaeus*, rather than presenting unrelated speculations on world-generation. Clearly Philo and Origen's understanding of the Creation does not derive entirely from the spontaneous sort of activity described in the Biblical accounts, and their attempt to integrate a noetic realm with the *Genesis* account can only have arisen under Platonic influence.

Demiurgy cannot be reduced to a single, coherent pattern, since the motif was exploited by such a range of thinkers. Even within Platonism, Plutarch and Atticus do not demote the Demiurge to a second-rank figure as Numenius does. However, the unity of my thesis is that while there are different representations of demiurgy, this is as a result of divergent readings of the *Timaeus.* Therefore, the present study is justified, not just because it examines the *Nachleben* of one of Western philosophy's most influential works, but because it reveals the use made of Plato to solve an important question: how did the world as we know it come to be?[3] However, that does not mean a range of atomised opinions. Certain trends emerge. Frequently, for example, the Demiurge produces the world as the result of his goodness. He desires that the world should be as good as possible, and achieves this by bringing order to the disordered elements. The Demiurge may also function as an intermediary between the higher, noetic world and the sublunar, material realm.[4] However, any attempt at a definition does not exhaust the complexity of the demiurgic notion or truly account for the various ways in which it is exploited. It is also misleading to represent those who exploit the motif as conceiving demiurgy as part of a coherent system; rather they respond differently to the questions raised and the intellectual challenges posed by the *Timaeus*. Modern exegeses of the dialogue have similarly failed to reach a consensus.

Influence of the Stoic Logos

Having attempted to define demiurgy and having at least managed to delineate some of its most pervasive features, the next step is to consider

[3] The *Timaeus* also raises the subsidiary question: why was it designed that way?
[4] O'Brien, C. S.: 2007b, 60

why such an approach to world-generation should prove inconsequential in the Old Academy, only to re-emerge again in the first century AD. Demiurgy ceased to be of interest within the Old Academy, since it no longer favoured the Theory of Forms, without which there is not much need for a Demiurge to instantiate Forms in the material realm. The Demiurge's return to prominence, on the other hand, may be traced to the fact that he proved useful in the academic climate of the first to third centuries, as a means of accommodating dualistic systems which were popular during this period.

In any case, the Demiurge did not simply disappear, but persisted in the Stoic concept of the *Logos*, as a rational divine element which assisted with the better ordering of the world. This Stoic contribution to the interpretation of the *Timaeus* has been conclusively demonstrated by Gretchen Reydams-Schils' 1999 study *Demiurge and Providence.* It might appear counterintuitive to suggest that the Stoics played an important role in cosmological theory, since they displayed such limited interest in the area in the period following Posidonius. However, this is mainly due to their reliance on the doxographical codification of their viewpoints, and, as Lapidge points out, the resultant lack of an adequate expertise in cosmology to respond to the criticisms of figures like Plutarch leaves us with a highly biased account of the technical level of Stoic cosmology.[5] The Stoics were also less interested in cosmology once it seemed to be less important for achieving their ethical objectives. Cosmology could be justified if the *telos* of life was to bring oneself into harmony with the cosmos, but as the Stoics began to adopt an increasingly more realistic understanding of the minor role which man played in the cosmos as a whole, interest in this discipline waned. The Stoics, though, are an important intermediary stage in the development and transmission of demiurgy.

Plato in the *Timaeus* presents world-generation in two different ways, the more famous of which is the account of a Craftsman-god toiling at fashioning the universe, and the description of Reason and Necessity can be regarded as complementary to this. The second, less celebrated image is a biological one – the Receptacle is described as the mother and nurse of all. The Stoics use the language of the technological image, but ultimately reject it in favour of the biological one, which is enriched with appropriations from Aristotle's theory of sexual generation. In his important article 'Nature as Craftsman in Greek Thought', Friedrich Solmsen demonstrates that both images of world-generation, that of craftsmanship and procreation,

[5] Lapidge: 1973, 240

actually precede Plato, but the primary model in Greek cosmogony is the biological one. This is illustrated by the marriages of various deities in the earliest Greek cosmogony which we possess: Hesiod's *Theogony*. However, it should be noted that both there and in the *Works and Days*, Hephaestus fashions the first woman, meaning that both technical and biological concepts co-exist from the beginning of Greek speculations in this area.

Empedocles too uses an image that can be regarded as demiurgic in his description of earth 'receiving in broad melting pots two portions of water and four of fire'.[6] Plato's Demiurge echoes elements of Anaxagoras' *Nous* to the extent that they are both ordering Intellects. As Anaxagoras comments 'mind also devised this orderly revolution in which now the stars, the sun and the moon revolve'.[7] Despite this, Solmsen concludes that 'the Demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus* is a conception much too original to be explained as a synthesis of earlier thinkers' ideas'.[8] It is not that Plato's Demiurge is merely a Mind that orders, rather he is capable of deliberately pursuing rational choices in order to further his objectives. For example, he chooses a skull constructed of bone, rather than flesh, as this will endow humans with greater rational capacity, thereby furthering his objective of a cosmos with increased order and intelligibility (*Tim.* 75b).

The Stoics distinguish between an active and a passive principle, which can be described in various ways – as God or *Logos* and matter or as fire and moisture. Despite this, the Stoics adopt a monistic approach, similar to that of the pre-Socratics. Their two principles do not exist independently of each other and the distinction is essentially just one which is made in thought, rather than observable in actuality. While it may seem evident that that which acts could not possibly have much of a role to play without that which is acted upon, such an argument provides another weapon in the arsenal of those engaged in polemical attacks against the Stoics, who are already vulnerable as a result of what appears to be a failure to differentiate properly between principles, such as God and matter, and elements, such as fire and water.

In any case, the Stoics account for two of the principles of the *Timaeus*, but positively reject its third principle, the Forms. In their version, God is immanent:

> The Stoics also criticise Plato for having said that since the models of all things exist in a venerable, pre-existent and ancient substance, the sensible

[6] Fr. 31b Diels-Kranz, trans. Solmsen.
[7] Fr. 59b12 Diels-Kranz, trans. Solmsen.
[8] Solmsen: 1963, 480

> world was made by God according to an immortal model. For, in fact, there is no need for an immortal model, according to them, since the seminal reason, which pervades another nature, which takes hold of it and apprehends it, has brought forth the whole world and everything which is in it. (Calcidius, *In Tim.*, 294, p. 296, 11–162)

The Stoic model is a different one: there is no separation between God and his product, since Reason works from within Matter. Once Matter is regarded as passive, it detracts somewhat from God's accomplishment. He no longer has to labour at world-generation and it becomes an effortless activity. This immanence can be regarded as a failure to distinguish between God and Matter: 'The Stoics believed that God is either matter or is even an inseparable quality of matter and that he passes through matter just as semen through the genitals' (Calcidius, *In. Tim.* 294, p. 296, 19–297.3 (= *SVF* 1.87)). The terminology does, however, reveal the influence of the Platonist demiurgic image. One has to only consider passages such as 'fire, functioning as a craftsman [*technikôs*] proceeds on a course towards generation' (*SVF* 1.171 = DL 7.156; *cf. SVF* 2.1027), fire referring to God or nature. Similarly, God is described as 'producing like a craftsman (δημιουργεῖν) every single thing throughout all matter' (DL 7.134). As Zeno comments: 'whatever in the execution of our craftsmanship is carried out by hand, Nature accomplishes much more skilfully, by the crafting fire, so to speak, the teacher of the remaining crafts' (*SVF* 1.171 = Cicero, *ND* 11.57).

The parallel in the Stoic mind between cosmogony and procreation is evident: 'just as the sperm is contained in the engendering fluid, in such a manner does God, as the generative *logos* (reason/forming principle) of the cosmos, remain behind in the moisture making matter easy to work for Him for the subsequent generation' (DL 7.136). An important mediator between the technological and biological images is Aristotle, who referred to the sperm as a craftsman at *GA* 1.22.730b5–32.[9] He also compares the seed to a moving tool which can bring form to matter through its motion (though by this Aristotle means the actualisation of a potentiality). Aristotle notes 'it does not make a difference to say "engendering fluid" or "movement responsible for the growth of each of the parts". For the *logos* (formative principle) of the movement is the same' (*GA* 4.3.767b18–20). Despite Aristotle's criticism of the demiurgic model, he everywhere betrays its influence. He distinguishes between Reason and Necessity, as Plato does, and numerous details, such as the diaphragm serving as a partition between the exalted and more degraded parts of the body are clearly drawn from

[9] Todd: 1978, 144; Hahm: 1977, 73.

the *Timaeus*.[10] Aristotle compares *pneuma* to a multifunctional instrument (*polychreston organon*) in *GA* 5, where it is also described as a hammer or anvil.[11] As Solmsen notes, even in his disagreements with Plato, Aristotle betrays his influence: Plato asserts at *Tim.* 74a7–d2 that flesh was produced as a protective covering for bone, whereas Aristotle at *PA* 2.9 inverts this by claiming that bone was designed as a support for flesh.[12]

For Aristotle, there was no need to posit a craftsman who worked upon nature, but rather nature itself was capable of directing itself towards a teleological function: 'wherever there is an end (*telos*), the preceeding and subsequent steps are undertaken for the sake of this end. For just as in (human) undertakings, so too in nature, and as it is in nature, so it is in (human) undertakings, if nothing prevents it. And (human) undertakings aim at an end and nature too aims at an end' (Arist. *Phys.* 2.8.199a8*ff*). Even though there is no need for the image of a Demiurge, nature itself in Aristotle's account is envisaged as working like a craftsman, with analogies drawn from a variety of occupations. As Solmsen notes, each of these analogies tends to be self-contained; there is no attempt to assemble them within a coherent overarching scheme, as Plato does with the Demiurge. To be more accurate, it is not that nature works like a craftsman, but that craftsmen imitate nature (as stated at *Phys.* 2.8.199a15*ff*.)[13] and also at *Phys.* 2.8.199a12*ff*.: 'if a house were made by nature, it would come into being as now it does by craftsmanship and if those things which nature produces were not generated only by nature, but also by craftsmanship, they would be generated just as they are by nature.' This does not imply that nature considers the 'end' of its productions, as Plato's Demiurge does; the spider does not do so when it weaves a web or the swallow when it builds its nest.[14] Solmsen sees a further trace of Aristotle's Academic heritage in his choice of the term ὕλη to mean matter, although the term literally means wood, but this is an obvious choice for the material of a craftsman, particularly if one envisages him as a carpenter fabricating a bed, as Plato does at *Rep.* x.

Aristotle applied this conception of nature to his theory of sexual generation. The father does not supply any material content to his offspring; that is supplied by the mother. The father's contribution is to shape this material 'just as from the carpenter nothing passes into the timber, his material, and no physical part of the art of carpentry is present in the product, what is

[10] Solmsen: 1963 cites numerous examples of these similarities: On the distinction between Reason and Necessity, 'Nature is in the class of purpose clauses', Arist. *Phys.* 2.198b10*ff*.
[11] *GA* 5.8.789b6–13 [12] Solmsen: 1963, 486
[13] As Solmsen points out (Solmsen: 1963, 488) a similar attitude is expressed in Democritus 68B154.
[14] Solmsen: 1963, 488

due to the carpenter is the shape and form . . . ' (*GA* 1.22.730b9–15, trans. Solmsen).

By using this biological theory, the Stoics can present world-generation in terms of sexual intercourse:

> Zeus, mindful of Aphrodite and genesis, grew softer and having arrived at this point and having extinguished much of his light, he turned himself into fiery air of a milder fire. And having engaged in intercourse with Hera . . . he ejected the complete engendering fluid of the universe. And he made the substance (*ousia*) wet, a single seed of the universe, running through it himself, just like the moulding and demiurgic breath (*pneuma*) in the engendering fluid. At this point, he is composed so as to resemble most closely the other living beings, since he might be accurately said to be composed of soul and body. He then easily shaped and moulded the remaining things, having poured the smooth and soft substance around himself. (*SVF* 2.622 = Dio Chrysost. *Or.* XXXVI §55)

So the Stoics drew not just upon Aristotelian biological theory and the biological theory of the *Timaeus*, but also upon the Greek cosmogonical tradition, to form their cosmobiology. After all, the idea of equating fire with *Logos* can be found in Heraclitus. While they reject a demiurgic model, the imprint of the *Timaeus* can easily be observed. Plato too regards the cosmos as a living being. Like Plato, the Stoics also drew a distinction between two cosmic levels. Again, it is problematic to see how one might draw such a divide in a pantheistic system, if God is meant to be immanent in all of matter, although the Stoics are able to explain it through parallelism with the human soul: 'mind pervades every part of it, just as the soul pervades our bodies. But some parts it pervades to a greater extent and others less. Some parts it passes through as a '*hexis*' or bond, just like the bones and sinews and through other parts like mind, just like the command centre' (*SVF* 2.634 = DL 7.138).

This command centre or *hēgemonikon* is the Stoic equivalent of the Platonic intellect, where *pneuma*, used as an equivalent of God or *Logos* in certain contexts, occurs in such a concentration that it provides the ability to think.[15] It therefore exists in the human soul (*SVF* 2.458), meaning that for the Stoics, as for Plato, the human soul is a microcosm of the world. The idea of the world being regulated by a *pneuma* is clearly influenced by the notion of the Platonic World-Soul, which is the metaphysical system Plato posits in the *Timaeus*, if one decides to demythologise the Demiurge. Zeno drew a distinction between heavenly fire, where he located God (*SVF*

[15] Lapidge: 1973, 171

1.154) and the sublunar realm, and Chrysippus too observed a distinction, even if his pronouncements are a little confusing, locating God both in the *aether* (*SVF* 2.579) and in the purest part of the *aether* (*SVF* 2.644), though naturally both of these statements can be regarded as consistent.

So the basic Stoic position is that a πῦρ τεχνικόν, a crafting-fire, transforms part of itself into water or matter and that subsequently acting upon this it produces the four elements, and at the end of the cosmic cycle the universe dissolves back again into a πῦρ τεχνικόν which consumes it. It is easy to see that such a position creates numerous problems: (1) How can fire and water be regarded as principles and subsequently as elements? (2) The Stoic concept of *ekpyrosis* resolves an issue that Plato had left live in the *Timaeus*, namely why God should spontaneously decide to generate the world, by contextualising it as an event within a cosmic cycle, but it does not manage to escape from related weaknesses. What does God do in the period between *ekpyrosis* and world-generation? (3) From a Platonist perspective, there is a difficulty with God's immanence in the world and his operation directly upon matter, without mediation.

To be fair, the Stoic system does have the advantage of ensuring that if Providence is immanent in the world, the way the cosmos is ordered is the best sort of arrangement,[16] (or if one wishes to be pessimistic, it is a matter of indifference, but any other arrangement would equally be a matter of indifference). Plato, admittedly, regards the Demiurge as producing the best possible world, but it is a world where the Demiurge is constrained by factors outside of his control. As Cicero's Epicurean at *De Natura Deorum* 1.19 comments in a mocking reference to the Platonists, it does appear to be beneath God's dignity to have to labour at world-generation. The Demiurge seems to be a particularly unfortunate image, when one of the advantages of positing a Demiurge in the first place is that it can be used to avoid placing the First Principle in parts of the cosmos which might be regarded as beneath its dignity to go:

> For you yourselves are accustomed to say that there is nothing which is impossible for a god to achieve, and without any labour, just as the limbs of a man are moved without a struggle by his mind and desire, in this way you say that the power of the gods can shape and move and change things. And you do not say this as a superstition or old wives' tale, but as a scientific and consistent account; for the matter of things, from which and in which all things are, is entirely flexible and changeable, so that there is nothing which cannot, however suddenly, be formed and changed out of it and the shaper

[16] Long: 2010, 47