

## CHAPTER I

### THE SETTING: PLATO'S *TIMAEUS*

The *Timaeus* recounts the coming to be of our cosmos in an exhaustive explanatory account. Given the sheer magnitude of this topic, I am unable to provide here a full summary of the many details contained in the Timaean creation story.<sup>1</sup> I will instead introduce its key elements, draw attention to a number of interpretative matters that have provoked complex responses from the ensuing tradition, and thereby set out the backdrop to the dialogue's treatment at the hands of our Latin interpreters. I will begin with a basic synopsis of the dialogue, followed by an overview of those parts of the text that particularly engaged our authors' minds.

#### Dialogue Content

At the outset of the *Timaeus* Socrates reminds his interlocutors, Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates, of a discussion they had on the previous day (17c). The topic of this discussion was a city's best possible political design, and the city's inhabitants. The type of society discussed included the presence of guardians, men and women who, having undergone training and education that had rendered them 'both spirited and philosophical' (18a),<sup>2</sup> lived separately from the other societal groups and were charged with defending the city in times of war. While these and other references in Socrates' description of the earlier discussion resemble topics that are discussed in the *Republic*, his description is rather too incomplete to allow for the assumption that we ought to consider the *Timaeus* a straightforward sequel

<sup>1</sup> For a basic, and succinct survey of the dialogue's contents, along with brief discussions of the various interpretative issues, see Zeyl 2000: xiii–lxxxix. See further Brisson 1974 and the classic commentaries by Taylor 1928 and Cornford 1937.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own except where indicated otherwise.

to this dialogue. We may fare best if we assume that the discussion which had preceded the *Timaeus* explored a number of themes that are developed at greater length in the *Republic*, without insisting on a more direct relationship between the two dialogues.<sup>3</sup>

Socrates' starting point for the discussion recorded in the *Timaeus* is the nature of the inhabitants of an ideally structured society. The previous conversation, it appears, had merely described them in theoretical terms. Socrates now expresses the wish to observe these inhabitants in action. Prompted by this request, Critias proposes to relate an account, passed on to him by his famous ancestor Solon, about the inhabitants of primeval Athens. Victors over mighty Atlantis, these Athenians of old, Critias believes, may be the type of society Socrates has in mind. Short of launching directly into his portrayal of ancestral Athens, however, Critias suggests they start at the very beginning:<sup>4</sup> first, the politician, philosopher, and astronomer Timaeus will describe the coming to be of the universe, leading up to the creation of humans and other living creatures.

At the centre of Timaeus' speaking part is a creation account in which a divine craftsman creates our cosmos by imposing order on chaotic materials. Timaeus initially frames his account with the dualistic metaphysical structure familiar from other dialogues. An intelligible realm of being, *to on* τὸ ὄν<sup>5</sup> ('that which is'), that contains everlasting and immutable forms is distinguished from the sphere of coming to be, *to gignomenon* τὸ γιγνόμενον ('that which comes to be'), in which our universe,

<sup>3</sup> Along with many ancient commentators, including Calcidius (*Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, chapter 5, p. 206, l. 19. All references to Calcidius are according to Bakhouche 2011), Taylor 1928: 46 considered the *Timaeus* to be the sequel to the *Republic*. Against this view see e.g. Cornford 1937: 4–5; see also Gill 1977, and Johansen 2004: 7–23, who argues that the *Timaeus–Critias* is a thematic expansion of the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*.

<sup>4</sup> Foreshadowing Timaeus' methodological programme introduced at *Tim.* 29b2f: 'With regard to every subject matter, it is most important to begin at the topic's natural beginning.'

<sup>5</sup> I will retain the Greek script in quotations and discussions that make reference to specific Greek source texts while transliterating individual terms in the context of more general discussions. I am aware that this distinction is not always clear-cut, and that this policy will, at times, result in a juxtaposition of Greek and English script.

an object of sense perception, is located (27d5ff.). Our physical world is formed by the demiurge from the materials at his disposal in the likeness of an intelligible paradigm, the 'eternal living being', perhaps best understood to represent the totality of intelligible forms whose physical counterparts are to form our universe. These counterparts, the components of our natural world, arise and perish within a substrate or medium that Timaeus terms χώρα, 'space', and ὑποδοχή, the 'receptacle' of physical objects.

Mirroring the intelligible model as far as its physical nature allows, the universe is itself constructed as a divine living creature that possesses soul and intellect. Despite his initial focus on the construction of the cosmic body, Timaeus stresses that the order of his narrative does not reflect the actual order of creative acts. Prior to the formation of the physical universe, the demiurge constructed the cosmic soul, superior to the former in seniority and nobility. The cosmic soul is generated by the demiurge out of the ingredients 'being', 'sameness', and 'difference', which are blended together. These rather obscure ingredients reflect the soul's intellectual faculties that allow it to recognize the objects of its thought. In other words, Timaeus establishes an ontological affinity between soul, as the subject engaged in thought, and the objects of its thought.

The cosmic soul is woven into the physical universe and, penetrating the latter from within, steers and regulates the movements of the celestial bodies through its own motions. Simultaneously with the creation of these heavenly bodies the god creates time. The regular orbits of the fixed stars and planets serve as instruments that, from the very start of their existence, determine and safeguard the temporal extensions pertaining to the created universe. Despite the world's own perishability owing to its physical nature, its sempiternity is vouchsafed by the will of its divine creator.

Human soul claims kinship with the cosmic soul. It is constructed by the demiurge out of the same ingredients, albeit of less purity, and thus exhibits the same intellectual faculties as its cosmic counterpart. Upon the soul's conjunction with a mortal body that is, in turn, equipped with sense organs

adapted to its physical environment, it initially experiences disturbances caused by its exposure to these surroundings. Its potential success in controlling these disturbances would result in its return to the celestial sphere, where it is no longer exposed to the deteriorating influences of an incarnate existence.

The creation of the corporeal parts of the various living creatures that inhabit the universe is delegated to subordinate divine agents, who are themselves created by the demiurge. With regard to the popular divinities familiar from the Olympian stage, Timaeus stresses that any account of their origin is beyond human understanding, a view that resigns us to accepting the accounts propagated by ‘the children of the gods’, ‘even though they speak without plausible or compelling proofs’ (40d8–e2). In what follows, Timaeus supplies a divine ancestry that begins with Heaven and Earth, noting that the poets’ authority on the subject is based on their professed kinship with the gods.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not we choose to take seriously Timaeus’ appeal to their authority, it is clear that the Olympian deities are sidelined in his creation narrative, which, of course, deviates from the traditional theogonies familiar from poetic accounts. Following a detailed description of human physiology, Timaeus concludes his account with remarks concerning the creation of women and of the living creatures inhabiting the remaining parts of our natural world.

The Timaeian narrative portrays the universe as a teleologically structured whole. Chaos is transformed into orderly beauty, an aesthetic feature that reflects the purposeful cooperation of the world’s harmoniously arranged components. The universe is as beautiful and as good as it can be, exhibiting a kinship of aesthetic and ethical value that coincides in the Greek word *καλός* (e.g. 29e5). What is more, this twofold value is the design of intellect, represented by the demiurge whose own goodness, which he wishes to bestow upon his creation, is the driving

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps a reference to poets such as Musaeus and Orpheus, cf. *Rep.* 346e3–4, where Adeimantus scoffs at those who use the testimony of poets like Musaeus and Orpheus, ‘children of the moon and the Muses, as they say’, to argue that gods may be swayed by ignoble men through sacrifice and prayer.

force behind the creation process. In order to make the cosmos good, he imposes rationality upon it. He incorporates intellect into the cosmic soul, whose rational activity, through its interconnectedness with the cosmic body, results in the orderly, spherical rotations of the planets. Human soul, through its material kinship with cosmic soul, is the cognitive link that allows us to participate in this cosmic rationality. By aligning our soul's revolutions, our rational activity, with heaven's spherical motions, the manifestation of cosmic soul's engagement in rational thought, we become orderly and good.

### Methodology

Our understanding of *Timaeus*' narrative method hinges on the apparently ambivalent characterization of his account as both *μῦθος* and *λόγος*. Are we dealing with a *μῦθος* of our world's first origins, a mythical tale without any serious claim to coherence or scientific accuracy? Perhaps *Timaeus* is offering a metaphorical attempt to illustrate the underlying nature of, and relationships among, the various physical components and mechanisms in our world? Or maybe we are dealing with a scientific *λόγος* after all, with an exposition, albeit in polished prose, of natural philosophy? Alternatively again, our desire to distinguish between both genres may be ill-advised: the dialogue's synthesis of *μῦθος* and *λόγος*, far from indicating a deliberate methodological strategy, may carry no great significance, with both terms being used interchangeably. Let us turn to the narrator in search for clarity.

In a notorious passage, *Tim.* 29b2–d3, *Timaeus* reflects upon the nature and scope of his creation account. We are advised, in the first of many instances, that those *λόγοι* which offer an interpretation of subject matter pertaining to the physical realm, itself an *εἰκὼν* or 'image' formed in likeness of the intelligible model, achieve likelihood with regard to their truth status: 'One ought to determine ... that the accounts concerning that which has been fashioned in the likeness of [the intelligible model], and which is itself a likeness,

ought to be [fashioned] in a like manner, in the likeness of those [accounts that treat of the intelligible model itself].<sup>7</sup> Timaeus' observation rests on the preceding premise that accounts which serve as the 'exegetes' (ἐξηγηταί) of a particular subject matter are akin to the very material they treat: 'In the case of the likeness and its model, [we ought to determine that] the accounts bear a kinship (συγγενεῖς ὄντας) to the subject matter of which they serve as exegetes' (29b3–5). (In the Greek text, we note how the effect of the alike-sounding syllables ἐκεῖνο, ἀπεικασθέντος, εἰκόνο, εἰκότας, and ἐκείνων underlines the statement's very own assertion by heeding its advice.) The kinship Timaeus has in mind is of the following type: accounts that treat of the intelligible realm, in which the everlasting and unchanging forms are located, are themselves 'unshakeable' in their consistency and irrefutable. In turn, accounts that deal with our physical cosmos, itself the 'likeness' (εἰκῶν) of an intelligible paradigm, are aptly characterized by Timaeus as 'likely' (εἰκότες). Timaeus underlines his train of thought by drawing an analogy between the ontological status, or class, of an account's subject matter and the degree of its epistemological reliability. As the ontological class 'being' (οὐσία) stands to the ontological class 'coming to be' (γένεσις), so the maximum degree of epistemological reliability, 'truth' (ἀλήθεια), stands to the lower degree of epistemological reliability 'convincingness' (πίστις).

Timaeus takes pains to remind his listeners repeatedly<sup>8</sup> that he is offering an εἰκῶς λόγος, or εἰκῶς μῦθος, which suggests that these expressions carry a programmatic function for his investigation and are crucial for our understanding of the dialogue. But what exactly does Timaeus mean by this characterization? Unsurprisingly, the scholarship on the topic is extensive<sup>9</sup> and

<sup>7</sup> [διοριστέον τοὺς λόγους ...] τοῦ πρὸς μὲν ἐκεῖνο [παράδειγμα] ἀπεικασθέντος, ὄντος δὲ εἰκόνο, εἰκότας ἀνὰ λόγον τε ἐκείνων ὄντας.

<sup>8</sup> Reference to the εἰκῶς λόγος or εἰκῶς μῦθος occurs again at *Tim.* 30b7, 44d1, 48c1, 48d2, 49b6, 53d5–6, 55d1, 56a1, 56d1, 57d6, 59c6, 68d2, 72d7, 90e8.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Baltes 1976, Bryan 2012, Burnyeat 2009, Howald 1922, Donini 1988, and Meyer-Abich 1973.

I shall merely outline some of the most important aspects pertaining to Timaeus' methodology.<sup>10</sup> Εἰκῶς as it appears in our dialogue, conveys the sense of 'portraying an image', inasmuch as an εἰκῶς λόγος is identified by Timaeus as the type of account that deals with an image, an εἰκῶν, such as our universe. This relation is reinforced by the similarity of both terms, εἰκῶν, 'likeness', and εἰκῶς 'likely'.<sup>11</sup> The epistemological status of Timaeus' account is εἰκῶς, 'likely', due to the ontological status of its subject matter, the universe, a likeness or a copy belonging to the sphere of change.<sup>12</sup>

The notion of probability conveyed by the term εἰκῶς has sometimes been interpreted as that of scientific hypothesis. On this view, the Timaeus εἰκῶς λόγος is understood to be a provisional or approximate estimation, as opposed to accurate scientific knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Others, as indicated above, emphasize Timaeus' occasional use of the expression εἰκῶς

<sup>10</sup> The following paragraphs appear in a much condensed and modified form in Hoenig 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Plato plays on this similarity also at *Rep.* 517d1 and *Soph.* 236a8.

<sup>12</sup> Bryan 2012: 114–60, especially 139–60, emphasizes such a meaning of εἰκῶς which, she argues, expresses a positive relation between model and likeness. She rejects the notion that Timaeus' εἰκῶς λόγος should be considered 'deficient' when compared to accounts that treat of the intelligible realm. Burnyeat 2009: 179–80 suggests 'reasonable' for εἰκῶς at *Tim.* 29c2 instead of the commonly accepted 'likely' as an initial interpretation of the text, and 'probable' as the second reading, an inference based on the fact that the most reasonable (in the sense of: 'disclosing the workings of reason in the cosmos') account coincides with that which is most probable. εἰκῶς is to be regarded as an 'aspiration' for Timaeus whose task it is to provide a μῦθος that is appropriate to its subject matter (ibid. 178).

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Taylor 1928: 59. A clear witness to the association of the εἰκῶς λόγος, or μῦθος, with fictitious mythical narrative, as opposed to scientific inquiry, is Susemihl's translation of 1977, in which Timaeus at 29b5ff. declares that accounts dealing with subject matter that is abiding and firm and discernible by intellect (τοῦ μὲν οὖν μονίμου καὶ βεβαίου καὶ μετὰ νοῦ καταφανοῦς μονίμου) are likewise abiding and firm, and 'soweit es überhaupt wissenschaftlichen Erörterungen zukommt, unwiderleglich und unerschütterlich zu sein, darf man es hieran in nichts fehlen lassen', translating 'as far as it befits *scientific discussions* to be irrefutable and unshakable ...' for καθ' ὅσον οἶόν τε καὶ ἀνελέγκτοις προσήκει *λόγοις* εἶναι καὶ ἀνίκητοις. At the close of the passage Susemihl's Timaeus warns his listeners that, in the case of those accounts dealing with subject matter pertaining to the sphere of coming to be and change, it is fitting [sich] damit zu begnügen, wenn *die Dichtung* nur die Wahrscheinlichkeit für sich hat und wir nichts darüber hinaus verlangen dürfen', translating 'it befits us to be content if *the myth* merely holds probability ...' for ἀγαπᾶν χρὴ ... ὥστε περὶ τούτων τὸν εἰκότα μῦθον ἀποδεχομένους πρέπει τούτου μηδὲν ἔτι πέρα ζητεῖν.

μῦθος,<sup>14</sup> instead of εἰκῶς λόγος, to describe his own narrative as indicative of the fact that the dialogue should be read as a myth, a fictional story or tale that stands in contrast to a rational, scientific inquiry. This viewpoint complements the assumption that μῦθος and λόγος should not be understood as synonyms,<sup>15</sup> but that Plato wished to stress the mythical character of the Timaeon account. Further, μῦθος has been taken to describe a type of account that relates to the human sphere and that stands in contrast to a type of knowledge, or reality, humans cannot attain.<sup>16</sup> Finally, Plato's dialogue has been interpreted as a combination of both λόγος and μῦθος, a rationally argued myth centring on the creation of the universe.<sup>17</sup>

It is precisely the ambiguity of Timaeus' language that presents an opportunity for our Latin interpreters to put on display the originality of their own approach to Timaeus' εἰκῶς λόγος. The choice between the various possible approaches to the text, a choice faced by the reader of Plato's dialogue and the Platonic interpreter alike, will to a considerable extent be influenced by his or her interpretation of several key elements contained in the Timaeon cosmology, to which I will now turn.

<sup>14</sup> Apart from its appearance at 29d2, see 59c6 and 69b1.

<sup>15</sup> A viewpoint that rejects the position of Vlastos 1965: 380–3 and, more recently, Rowe 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Johansen 2004: 62–4. Meyer-Abich 1973: 30–1 suggests that the mention of μῦθος at 29d2 echoes Critias' Atlantis story whose contents, Athens's primeval past, depict a λόγος compared to the μῦθος the Athenians believe to be their past while they remain unaware of prior events erased from their knowledge due to natural catastrophes. Like the Athenians, humans are unaware of the origins of their existence and have access only to mythical self-knowledge as opposed to the true λόγος that reveals the beginnings of human existence. The latter can be attained by philosophical investigation.

<sup>17</sup> Johansen 2004: 63 argues that λόγος must be understood as describing the *genus* of accounts in general *as well as* describing a *particular* type of account within the genus λόγος which possesses a higher rationality than another type of account within the same genus: the μῦθος (63). Burnyeat 2009: 168–9 defines as the most important characteristic mark of a μῦθος, which he interprets in the strong sense of the word – 'myth' as opposed to 'story', 'tale' – to be its reference to the divine. The dialogue is a myth inasmuch as it is a theogony describing the coming to be of the created god, the sensible universe. An εἰκῶς μῦθος becomes an εἰκῶς λόγος, being a rational (i.e. 'describing the creator's rational reasoning') account of natural philosophy and, at the same time, a myth.



## An Interpretative Controversy

Any student of Plato's *Timaeus* will have to address an interpretative question of decisive significance for the understanding of the dialogue.<sup>18</sup> Did Plato have Timaeus offer to his interlocutors an actual creation account that identifies the cosmos as generated?

Timaeus appears to suggest as much. He draws attention to the createdness of the universe at *Tim.* 27c4–5 where he describes his appointed task as ‘producing speeches concerning the All, in what manner it has been created or else is uncreated’ (τοὺς περὶ τοῦ παντὸς λόγους ποιεῖσθαι πῃ μέλλοντας, ἢ γέγονεν ἢ καὶ ἀγενές ἐστιν).<sup>19</sup> He begins this inquiry by drawing a preliminary distinction between the two ontological spheres of being and coming to be: ‘what is that which always is and has no coming to be, and what is that which is always coming to be but never is?’ (τί τὸ ὄν αἰεί, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον, καὶ τί τὸ γιγνόμενον μὲν αἰεί, ὄν δὲ οὐδέποτε, 27d6). Turning next to the ontological classification of the universe, he asks the all-important question ‘whether [the All] has always been, having no origin of coming to be, or whether it has come to be, starting out from some origin’ (πότερον ἢν αἰεί, γενέσεως ἀρχὴν ἔχων οὐδεμίαν, ἢ γέγονεν, ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς τινος ἀρξάμενος, 28b6–7). The answer comes swiftly: ‘it has come to be’ (γέγονεν). He reaffirms his statement by declaring that the universe is subject to sense perception, and all things perceptible ‘come to be and have been generated’ (γιγνόμενα καὶ γεννητὰ, 28c1–2). As we saw in the previous section, he reminds his listeners, on several occasions, of the fact that his creation account is a likely story, a concession taken by some interpreters to undermine the overall credibility of his

<sup>18</sup> The classic study of this topic remains Baltes 1976, 1979. Cf. also Baltes and Dörrie 1998: 375–465.

<sup>19</sup> The accuracy of this reading is disputed and, due to its exegetical relevance, may have been the subject of frequent distortion. The manuscripts list ἢ γέγονεν ἢ καὶ ἀγενές ἐστιν (Burnet's A) and ἢ ... ἢ (F Y); Philoponus reads εἰ ... ἢ, Alcinous ἢ ... ἢ or ἢ ... εἰ, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus ἢ ... ἢ. It appears that ἢ ... ἢ is the preferred reading, and is, along with ἢ ... ἢ, considered ‘neutral’ with regard to its exegetical implications by Dillon 1989: 57–60, who discusses this passage and its variant readings in greater detail. See, however, Petrucci 2018: 147–53, who criticizes the notion of ‘ideological emendation’ in the case of Taurus.

account, instead of merely indicating Timaeus' doubt about the specific details that prompt his recurring reminders. But Timaeus nowhere indicates that the 'convincingness' of his words applies to his entire creation account.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, doubts with regard to the validity of a literal interpretation of his account arise from apparent inconsistencies in the narrative that threaten its internal coherence.<sup>21</sup> At 38b6–c3, Timaeus describes the creation of the cosmos as coinciding with the creation also of time (χρόνος δ' οὖν μετ' οὐρανοῦ γέγονεν). Time is created 'in accordance with the paradigm that is of an eternal nature' (κατὰ τὸ παράδειγμα τῆς διαιωνίας φύσεως). In his wish to replicate, as far as possible, the everlastingness of the intelligible model, the demiurge creates fixed celestial bodies whose orbiting movements mark the various extension of time (38c4–6), a perpetual image of eternity. This portrayal of events stands in apparent contradiction to other items in the narrative. Having identified the 'receptacle' as a third cosmological principle alongside being and coming to be, Timaeus describes how there occurred a reciprocal motion between this receptacle and the precursors of the physical elements that were contained in it and were moving in an erratic, disorderly fashion (52d2–53b5). According to Timaeus, these movements preceded the orderly structuring of the physical materials at the hands of the demiurge. If the sequence of events in his narrative were to unfold in chronological succession,<sup>22</sup> we would arrive at a scenario in which the disorderly motions in the receptacle occurred prior to the creation of time, in a time before time. It thus appears that Timaeus' narrative fails to provide a chronological frame in which the events portrayed can be coherently

<sup>20</sup> Noted, e.g. by Broadie 2012: 245.

<sup>21</sup> Parts of the following section appear in a much condensed and modified form in Hoening 2014. See also the summary by Zeyl 2000: xx–xxv.

<sup>22</sup> Petrucci 2016 and 2018 (especially chapter 2) argues that the dilemma should be described as that of a 'sempiternalistic' creation vs. a 'temporal' creation, rather than that of a 'literal' vs. a 'metaphorical' interpretation of the Timaeian creation account. More specifically, a 'literal' reading of the dialogue should not automatically be equated with a 'temporal' reading, given that non-temporal, 'literal' interpretations were held by a number of Platonic authors, as he argues.

located. A possible retort, pursued already by the dialogue's readers in antiquity, is to distinguish between pre-cosmic time and measured time that coincided with the creation of the cosmos. Taking the mention of time at 38b6–c3 to refer strictly to measured time avoids the pitfall of chronological inconsistency.<sup>23</sup>

Further criticism of Timaeus' narrative has been prompted by the createdness of soul. Before the demiurge set to creating the universe, Timaeus informs us, he created the world soul. In minute mathematical detail, the narrator reconstructs the creation process of this soul which, upon the creation of the world's physical body (36d8–e1), was to permeate the latter in perpetual self-rotating motion. Emphasis is put upon its priority over body in terms of age and excellence: '[the demiurge] constructed soul as prior and more senior to body, both in terms of coming to be and in terms of virtue' (ὁ δὲ [δημιουργὸς] καὶ γενέσει καὶ ἀρετῇ προτέραν καὶ πρεσβυτέραν ψυχὴν σώματος ... συνεστήσατο, 34c4–35a1), and on its having been created: it has 'come to be as the most excellent of things that have come to be at the hands of the most excellent of intelligible and eternal things' (τῶν νοητῶν αἰεί τε ὄντων ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀρίστου ἀρίστη **γενομένη** τῶν **γεννηθέντων**, 37a1–2). The assumption of a created soul clashes with Plato's description of the soul in the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates convinces Phaedrus that the soul's origin is uncreated (*Phaedr.* 245c9–d1). Such concerns appear less pressing if we desist from a unitarian perspective on Plato's philosophical positions, and allow for a developmental perspective, along with the assumption that the *Phaedrus* predated the composition of the *Timaeus*.

A further discrepancy between the *Timaeus* and the *Phaedrus* is the view, propagated by Socrates in the latter work at 245c9, that self-moving soul is 'the source and origin of motion to all things that move' (τοῖς ἄλλοις ὅσα κινεῖται ... πηγὴ καὶ ἀρχὴ κινήσεως), a claim that appears incompatible with the Timaeian

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Vlastos 1965: 409–14; Gloy 1986: 52–3. Sorabji 1983: 272–3 analyses the temporal vocabulary in Timaeus' narrative. He points *inter alia* at Plato's use of ποτε, πρίν, πρό τούτου, ὅτε, and of frequent past tenses in the passages *Tim.* 28b2–c2, 53a2–b5 and 69b2c2, all of which underline the notion of a pre-cosmic time.

pre-cosmic motion in the receptacle. Similarly, the Athenian of Plato's *Laws* describes the soul as 'identical with the first generation and motion of what is, has been, and will be' and 'the cause of all change and all motion in all things' (896a5–8;<sup>24</sup> cf. 892a2–c7, 899c6–7), a view once again incompatible with the assumption of chaotic, pre-cosmic motion as it is described by Timaeus whose account at no point identifies soul as a further principle alongside being, coming to be, and the receptacle.<sup>25</sup> This problem, however, does not disappear even if we understand the cosmic soul's creation along non-temporal lines. Soul's specific activity of rational thought, which manifests itself as regular, spherical motion, can no more easily be reconciled with the erratic motions in the receptacle. If inclined to press for doctrinal consistency between the Timaeus and other dialogues, we may take the references to soul as the origin and cause of all motion in the *Phaedrus* and the *Laws* to describe merely orderly, goal-directed motion, and thereby solve the problem of pre-cosmic erratic motion such as it appears in the *Timaeus*.

These and other arguments *pro* and *contra* a temporal interpretation are still reiterated today, while recent scholarship has seen a reinforcement of the literalist side.<sup>26</sup> Let us review more closely the most influential opinions on either side of the debate, beginning with Plato's own contemporaries. Aristotle addresses the problematic scenario of a 'time before time' at *Met.* 11.6,<sup>27</sup> where he also mentions the difficulties inherent in the assumption of a created time in the context of the creation of the world soul. Given the fact that soul is posterior to (pre-cosmic) motion – a reference to *Tim.* 34c4–35a1 – it must be disqualified as a principle of movement (1072a1–3).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> ἄρα ἔτι ποθοῦμεν μὴ ἰκανῶς δεδεῖχθαι ψυχὴν ταῦτόν ὃν καὶ τὴν πρώτην γένεσιν καὶ κίνησιν τῶν τε ὄντων καὶ γεγονότων καὶ ἔσομένων καὶ πάντων αὐτῶν ἐναντίων τούτοις, ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἀνεφάνη μεταβολῆς τε καὶ κινήσεως ἀπάσης αἰτία ἅπασι;

<sup>25</sup> The specific problems of a temporal reading of the creation account have been set out in greater detail by Baltes 1996: 77–85 and Sorabji 1983: 268–75.

<sup>26</sup> Most recently Broadie 2012, especially chapter 7.

<sup>27</sup> Ar. *Met.* 11.6 1071b6ff., cf. *Phys.* 8 251b10–27; cf. Sorabji 1983: 279–80.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle incorrectly reports Plato to have maintained that *soul*, rather than time, came to be 'along with the heavens' (1072a2). Cf. Baltes 1976: 8–18 for a more detailed synopsis of Aristotle's arguments against a created universe; further Cherniss 1944: 414–78 and Sorabji 1983: 276–83.

Moreover, Aristotle took issue with the idea of a divine agent that is immediately involved with the creation of the cosmos.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps prompted by Aristotle's criticism, the non-temporal reading of Plato's dialogue found favour with many ancient interpreters, for instance Plato's successor Xenocrates and his Academy.<sup>30</sup> It is again through Aristotle that we learn about their specific position. At *Cael.* 1.10 279b32–280a2 he mocks their claim that Plato had intended his creation account to be read *didaskalias charin*, 'for the sake of instruction', in the same manner as geometers would draw up and construct geometrical figures in order to facilitate their students' understanding of completed structures.<sup>31</sup> In neither case had an actual process of construction taken place. In a classic defence of the creationist interpretation Gregory Vlastos has pointed out, however, that a reading *didaskalias charin* cannot be directly connected with Plato,<sup>32</sup> and argued that the ascription of this position also to his pupil Speusippus and to Theophrastus is doubtful (the latter is reported to have believed that Plato 'perhaps', intended a reading *saphêneias charin*, 'for the sake of clarity', *Phys. op.* 11).<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the appeal to didactic or hypothetical method as a way of atoning for the incongruities in *Timaeus*' creation story gained support from numerous interpreters of Plato. Aetius, Plotinus, and Proclus are all credited with the belief in a creation account that had been set out *epinoiai* (in thought)<sup>34</sup> or *hupothesei* (by hypothesis).<sup>35</sup> Beyond these methodological aspects Platonists such

<sup>29</sup> The details of this charge against the Timaeian divinity are discussed in my examination of Cicero's interpretation of Plato's dialogue.

<sup>30</sup> Plut. *Procr. an.* 3.1013A. It is thought by some that this was the position also of Speusippus, cf. fr. 94–5 ed. Isnardi Parente 1982. See, however, Baltes 1976: 19 and more generally 18–22; *ibid.* 1996: 81; Sorabji 1983: 271 and Broadie 2012: 244 with n. 3. For a critical discussion cf. Petrucci 2018: 45–52.

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle derides their argument, suggesting they had advanced it to vindicate their master's testimony, thereby coming to their own, i.e. the Academy's, help: ἦν δέ τινες βοήθειαν ἐπιχειροῦσι φέρειν ἑαυτοῖς τῶν λεγόντων ἀφθαρτον μὲν εἶναι γενόμενον δέ, οὐκ ἔστιν ἀληθές.

<sup>32</sup> Vlastos 1965 (reprint of Vlastos 1939): 383 n. 2.

<sup>33</sup> As is done by Taylor 1928 and Cherniss 1944.

<sup>34</sup> Reiterated recently by Baltes 1996: 80–2.

<sup>35</sup> Baltes 1976: 82.

as Taurus,<sup>36</sup> Crantor, and Xenocrates<sup>37</sup> are reported to have regarded the overall aim of the dialogue as illuminating in non-temporal fashion a causal correlation between the intelligent divinity and the mechanical processes at work in the living cosmos. The efforts undertaken to bolster a non-temporal reading are famously summarized by the second-century Middle Platonist Calvenus Taurus. Philoponus at *Aet. mund.* 145.13–147.25 reports that Taurus distinguished four<sup>38</sup> senses in which the cosmos may be characterized as γενητός, ‘having come to be’;<sup>39</sup> γενητός describes (1) an object that, itself not having come to be, is of the same *genus* as objects that *have* come to be (i.e. some object may, for whatever reason, forever be ‘unseen’ but still remain ‘visible’ in *genus*); (2) an object that is composite ‘in thought’ even though it has never undergone an actual process of ‘being put together’; (3) an object eternally subjected to the process of coming to be and change; and (4) an object whose existence is dependent on something external, in the case of the cosmos, a dependency on god as its causative agent on a higher metaphysical plane. For a non-temporal reading of Plato’s terms γέγονεν, ‘it has come to be’, and ἀρχή, ‘origin’, supporting evidence from the dialogue itself was thought to be at hand. At *Tim.* 28b6, Timaeus asks whether the cosmos has existed always, having no origin of coming to

<sup>36</sup> Reported by Procl. *In Plat. Tim.* 1.76,1ff.

<sup>37</sup> Plutarch *Procr. an.* 3.1013a ascribes to Crantor and Xenocrates an identical viewpoint. Baltes 1976: 82–3 counts as a variation of this position also what he terms the ‘physical’ interpretation that appears, for instance, in Alcinoüs and Plutarch, and according to which Plato classified the cosmos as generated due to the fact that it was in a constant state of genesis. Baltes emphasizes as the common factor of both interpretations the dependence of the world’s coming to be on a causative principle that safeguards its continuous state of coming to be, the main difference lying in the assumption of an *ongoing* correlative relation between cause and effect that is pushed by Baltes’s physical interpretation, as opposed to the mere assumption of an ontological dependency between causative agent and its effected outcome.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Petrucci 2018: 36–45. Petrucci ascribes to Taurus a literal, sempiternalistic reading of the creation account. Cf. further Karamanolis 2006: 180–5, in particular 181–2. Sedley 2013: 197–8 with nn. 24–5 suggests that Taurus distinguished five meanings of γενητός, as opposed to the four meanings usually found in this passage. According to the fifth meaning listed by Taurus, γενητός refers to objects that possess ‘a bodily nature whose being consists in constant becoming’, as is explained at Philop. *Aet. mund.* 147,21–5.

<sup>39</sup> Philop. *Aet. mund.* 145,7–147,13. Cf. Baltes 1976: 106–8; Dillon 1996: 242–4.

be, γενέσεως ἀρχὴν ἔχων οὐδεμίαν, or whether it has come to be, γέγονεν, having begun from *some* origin, ἀπ' ἀρχῆς τινος ἀρξάμενος, where the addition of τινος may be taken to sideline a temporal origin of the cosmos.<sup>40</sup>

Plutarch and Atticus are known as proponents of temporal creation<sup>41</sup> against many Platonist voices up until that time.<sup>42</sup> According to the testimony of Proclus, Plutarch assumed that there had been a pre-cosmic 'trace' of time present in the receptacle, the precursor of ordered and created time. Rejecting an uncreated universe Atticus firmly maintained a creation 'according to time', by distinguishing pre-cosmic and disorderly time from orderly time created in conjunction with the cosmos. The distinction between a pre-cosmic and disorderly concept of time as opposed to a post-creation measured type has been reiterated most notably by Vlastos.<sup>43</sup> What is more, Plutarch accounted for pre-cosmic motion by postulating the existence of a prior, irrational state of the world soul that was responsible for the chaotic movement in the receptacle before the creation of cosmos, an event that effected the coming to be of the already existing world soul as a rational and benign cosmic element.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Plutarch distinguished chaotic matter, which existed prior to its ordering at the hands of the demiurge, from an orderly type of matter that came into being simultaneously with the cosmos. While Plutarch and Atticus are the most widely known adherents to a literal reading, it has been pointed out by Sedley<sup>45</sup> that more

<sup>40</sup> With τινος understood as an *alienans* qualification, denoting 'a beginning of some sort', i.e. a beginning that cannot be identified as such in its full common meaning which usually assumes a temporal aspect. Burnyeat (2002) identifies similar cases in Aristotle's *De Anima*, cf. 36f.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Procl. *In Plat. Tim.* 2.276,31–277,7; further, Philop. *Aet. mund.* 211,11ff.; 519,22–5.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Baltes 1976: 38–63; Sorabji 1983: 270.

<sup>43</sup> Vlastos 1965: 409–14. Vlastos' view that no ancient writer appreciated this distinction has been shown to be erroneous by Sorabji and Sedley, who point towards the evidence of Velleius' remarks in Cicero's *Nat. deor.* 1.21 and to the testimonies of Plutarch and Atticus.

<sup>44</sup> Plut. *Procr. an.* 1014b–1016d. Plutarch identified this soul with the evil world soul mentioned in Plato's *Laws* 896df. and with the Timaeian ἀνάγκη, 'Necessity' (*Tim.* 56c5f; cf. *Leg.* 741a, 818b); see also Proc. *In Plat. Tim.* 1.382,4.

<sup>45</sup> Sedley 2007: 107 n. 30 with reference to Procl. *In Plat. Tim.* 1.276,30–277,1.



ancient authors than has generally been assumed, among them Polemo and Cicero's tutor Antiochus, may have endorsed a creationist reading of the dialogue.

The reader's decision whether or not to interpret the *Timaeus* in a temporal manner has a far-reaching impact upon the manner in which the account's key components are to be understood. I shall now turn to these key themes of the dialogue that will prove significant for our authors.

### Demiurge, Cosmic Soul, and Lesser Divinities

Who or what is the demiurge, and what precisely is this divinity's role in the Timaeian creation account? According to the narrator's portrayal, the divine craftsman is characterized from the beginning as working with pre-cosmic materials. The actual process of creation that is described by Timaeus is thus not a creation *ex nihilo*, but the harmonic structuring and blending by the demiurge of the materials at his disposal. Does our narrator provide more specific information regarding the divinity's identity? On two occasions, the demiurge is characterized by Timaeus as 'responsible' (*Tim.* 28a4–5 and 28c2–3) for the coming to be of our world. Any hope for a full revelation of his identity is, however, immediately thwarted: 'to discover the maker and father of this All is a difficult task; having discovered him, it is impossible to explain him to the many' (τὸν μὲν οὖν ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντὸς εὐρεῖν τε ἔργον καὶ εὐρόντα εἰς πάντας ἀδύνατον λέγειν.)<sup>46</sup> Instead, Timaeus focuses on the god's specific role as the initiator of the cosmogonic process. Why did the demiurge create the orderly universe? His reason for doing so, according to

<sup>46</sup> It is possible to assume that Plato wished to express with this statement that a dialogue like the *Timaeus* was not composed in such a manner as to render its contents comprehensible to everybody, in contrast, for instance, to the *Laws*, ultimately intended to be accessible to every citizen of Magnesia. Alternatively, Plato may be alluding to the practice of contemporary mystery cults and the prohibition of revealing a divinity's name, a conjecture advanced by Proclus who associates this with Pythagorean practice. Cf. Procl. *In Plat. Tim.* 2.302,25–303,1. Baltzly et al. 2006–9 point to Iamblichus, *Vita Pyth.* 32.226.8–227.9 as a source for Proclus' explanations.



Timaeus at 29d7–e3, was his inherent goodness. ‘He was good, and in the good no envy with regard to anything ever arises.’ Free from envy, moreover, the demiurge wanted everything to be like himself, i.e. to be good, as far as this was possible. To this purpose, he concluded that the chaotic pre-cursors of our elemental physical materials, initially, had to be arranged in an orderly structure and then equipped with soul and intellect. Timaeus reconstructs the creator’s train of thought as resting on the following premises: 1) Whatever possesses intellect is more excellent than anything lacking intellect; 2) Intellect cannot arise anywhere except in conjunction with soul.<sup>47</sup>

The argument contained in this passage has led some to propose that the divine craftsman, seen as the personification of νοῦς, intellect, must necessarily possess soul. As a consequence, the demiurge has been perceived as identical with the cosmic soul. On this account, the creation of the world soul at the demiurge’s own hands is reduced to a narrative strategy, presumably intended to facilitate an understanding of the central role of the cosmic soul in the universe, and to reinforce its divine, immortal nature.<sup>48</sup> The fact that the cosmic soul is made up from the ingredients ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ that enable it to operate as a link between the intelligible and physical spheres may be taken to signify that the demiurge, when

<sup>47</sup> Apart from *Tim.* 37a2–4 and 46d5–6, see also Plato’s *Phil.* 30a9–10, *Euthyd.* 287d7–e1 and *Soph.* 239a4–8.

<sup>48</sup> An interpretation adapted by Archer-Hind 1888. Cornford 1937 refines this position by identifying the demiurge, specifically, as the rational part of the cosmic soul. See also Carone 2005 esp. 42–6 for a more recent endorsement of this view. Some scholars see a direct link between a ‘demythologized’ interpretation of the demiurge, i.e. the view that the figure of the demiurge was not intended by Plato as a realistic element in Timaeus’ account, and a non-literal reading of Timaeus’ creation story as a whole; cf. Dillon 2003: 81. The ‘conflation’ of the Timaeus’ demiurge with the cosmic soul, or other elements of the Timaeus’ narrative, is criticized by Broadie 2012. In support of a literal reading of the dialogue, Broadie rejects the identification of the demiurge with the world soul based on the fact that the demiurge is a ‘one–many’ cause: a craftsman is able to produce more than one creation of the same nature. The world soul, on the other hand, is a one–one cause of the natural universe under its command. What is more, Broadie stresses the importance to see the demiurge as distinct from the world soul and thereby from his creation in order to maintain its authoritative force over the cosmos that can only be maintained by a transcendent creator.

considered identical with the cosmic soul, is a mediating agent that connects the intelligible realm with our sensible world.

This interpretation is, however, difficult to square with Timaeus' emphasis on the contrast between the cosmic soul, the 'best of things that have come to be', and the demiurge, the 'best of things eternal and intelligible' (τῶν νοητῶν ἀεί τε ὄντων ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀρίστου ἀρίστη **γενομένη** τῶν **γεννηθέντων** [ἢ ψυχῇ], 37a1–2). Others set the divine craftsman on a par with a further element in the Timaeian metaphysical framework, the intelligible forms. However, identifying the demiurge with any one intelligible form, or with the intelligible paradigm, leaves unclear what caused the shift from the pre-cosmic state of affairs, a scenario of intelligible forms and erratic elemental 'traces' in the receptacle, to a cosmos to which orderly and regulated relations between the forms and the elements had given rise.<sup>49</sup> It was to become a most challenging focal point, beginning in particular with the Middle Platonic writers, to explain the divinity's responsibility for creating the sensible universe while maintaining its status as a transcendent being far removed from our human sphere. We shall find that interpreters from the early centuries of our era onwards preferred to associate the creator with the intelligible forms, often conceived of as being located in the creator's mind, instead of identifying him with the cosmic soul that permeated the universe, a development that reflects the increased focus on a divinity whose transcendence must be safeguarded at all costs.

While the demiurge is thus placed into an ontological class that differs from that of his own product, his creative effort is mirrored and continued in the material sphere by lesser divinities that have also been created by him. The dualistic set-up of

<sup>49</sup> Hampton 1990 interprets the divinity as identical with the Form of the Good, while Menn 1995 argues for the Form of Intelligence and emphasizes intellect's independence from soul. According to Menn, intellect is the active causal principle of order in the natural world, with the label 'demiurge' merely describing its relational function with regard to the cosmos. Against the specific charge that intellect cannot come to be except in conjunction with soul, Menn holds that, while it cannot arise or come to be without soul in the physical realm, it nevertheless can exist by itself in the intelligible realm. A further alternative is to understand the demiurge as representing a *technê*, a 'manifestation' of craftsmanship, cf. Robinson 2004: 83–6.

the creation account thus remains intact, while the beneficial impact of the intelligible god is carried into the material realm by various agents. The cosmic soul is merely the first and eldest of numerous other gods, i.e. the stars and the planets, that 'have come to be in the heaven' (*Tim.* 40c). As noted above, Timaeus sidesteps the traditional portrayal of the descendants of Cronos and Rhea, but soon assigns to all the divinities that 'rotate visibly', and to 'all that reveal themselves to the extent that they choose' (*Tim.* 41a3–4) and that 'have come to be' (*Tim.* 41a5), the task of constructing the human body (*Tim.* 41a7–d3). Before he retires and his divine assistants set out to imitate his creative work, the god himself fashions the human souls which he then places upon the various heavenly bodies, assigning one to each, and to whom he explains 'the nature of the All' and announces the 'laws of fate' (*Tim.* 41e2–3). According to these laws, irrational behaviour on the part of the human soul has as its consequence rebirth in a body which ranks lower on the hierarchy of mortal living beings. Human soul's knowledge of fate, acquired immediately after its coming to be, places the responsibility for future evil and misfortune firmly into its own hands – or rather, into the hands of the living creature to whom the soul is first assigned once it begins its earthly existence.

### Dualism

We have seen above that, starting from *Tim.* 27d5, Timaeus frames his creation story with the dualistic metaphysical and epistemological structure we encounter in Plato's *Republic* and other so-called 'middle' dialogues. A noetic realm, 'that which always is' (τὸ ὄν ἀεί), is distinguished from 'what always comes to be' (τὸ γιγνόμενον ἀεί),<sup>50</sup> our sensible universe.

<sup>50</sup> I have retained the ἀεί although I am aware that the evidence supporting it is inconclusive. The inclusion of a second ἀεί, one might assume initially, would have been favoured by those Platonists who endorsed a non-temporal reading and thus an ongoing process of coming to be. It is, nevertheless, omitted by the vast majority of

The ontological planes are associated at *Tim.* 28a1–4 with a corresponding pair of cognitive modes that provide access to them: being is accessible by intelligence, νόησις, with the help of reason (μετὰ λόγου), ‘what comes to be’, in turn, is ‘opined by opinion aided by non-rational sense perception’ (δόξῃ μετ’ αἰσθήσεως ἀλόγου δοξαστόν). These ontological–epistemological correlations are often associated with the Divided Line in Plato’s *Rep.* 6.509d–511 and *Rep.* 7.533d–534a, where the epistemological planes πίστις and εἰκασία are *sub-divisions* of δόξα.<sup>51</sup>

In the *Timaeus*, specifically, τὸ ὄν is described as the model or paradigm, παράδειγμα, which is ‘in accordance with itself and selfsame’, eternal (*Tim.* 28c–29a), and in whose likeness the divine craftsman fashions the materials at his disposal into an orderly All. As indicated above, the paradigm may be taken to represent the totality of intelligible forms that serve as the blueprints for the many sensible components of the universe.<sup>52</sup>

the Neoplatonist tradition, including Syrianus, Proclus, Simplicius, Olympiodorus, Asclepius, and Joannes Lydus. It is omitted, moreover, by the second-century writers Nicomachus of Gerasa, Numenius, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Sextus Empiricus. The Christian Philoponus was inconsistent in his omission, as listed by Whittaker 1969: 182. It is retained, oddly, by Eusebius (*Praep. evang.* 11.9) and perhaps also by Plutarch (suggested in *Def. or.* 433e: ἐκγονον ἐκείνου καὶ τόκον ὄντως αἰεὶ γιγνόμενον αἰεὶ τοῦτον ἀποφαίνοντες, a description of the sun as the offspring of Apollo, a possible allusion to the *Timaeus*), both of whom endorsed a temporal creation of the universe. Whittaker, who criticizes Burnet’s inclusion of the word in the OCT, argues further that the combination of αἰεὶ and τὸ γιγνόμενον does not necessarily deny a creation in time since the process of becoming could begin at and continue from the time of creation. Nevertheless, he holds that αἰεὶ was inserted by Platonists who favoured the Xenocratean interpretation of the *Timaeus*, and who, furthermore, may have been motivated by stylistic balance. Dillon 1989: 62 argues that the reading which retained αἰεὶ was more widely established among the non-temporal second-century tradition than assumed by Whittaker et al. He re-evaluates evidence from the *Didaskalikos* and several passages in the *Corpus Hermeticum* and points to Plotinus *Enn.* 3.3.7, 16–18, καὶ τὰ μὲν ἔμμενον αἰεὶ, τὰ δὲ ἐγίνετο αἰεὶ [οἱ καρποὶ καὶ τὰ φύλλα] καὶ τὰ γινόμενα αἰεὶ εἶχε τοὺς τῶν ἐπάνω λόγους ἐν αὐτοῖς ὅσον μικρὰ δένδρα βουληθέντα εἶναι, a statement Dillon takes to be deliberately playing on the various meanings of αἰεὶ that had been established by the Neoplatonist tradition. Dillon concludes that the inclusion of the second αἰεὶ should not necessarily be accounted for by ideological reasons.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. e.g. Cal. *Comm. in Tim.* 342, 568, 17–26, following a common line of exegesis.

<sup>52</sup> At *Tim.* 51d Timaeus explicitly refers to the ‘forms’ whose existence he demonstrates with the help of a syllogism that relies upon the previously introduced association of the two ontological planes and their epistemological correlates.

The distinction between the two ontological realms at the beginning of *Timaeus*' creation account provides the necessary set-up for his ensuing portrayal of our universe. It is to be located in the sensible realm that, in turn, bears all the characteristic marks of 'what has come to be'. It is perceptible by our senses and perishable in nature.

A closely connected correlative pair that is integral to the dualism of the *Timaeus* is the doublet eternity–time. We saw above that the creation of time coincides with the creation of the celestial bodies whose regular orbiting movements determine the extensions of time familiar to us (38b–39d). Time is a 'moving image of [unchanging] eternity' (*Tim.* 37d5), an image that, in contrast to eternity, which abides in one, moves and changes according to number (*Tim.* 37d6–7). For later Platonic interpreters 'eternity that abides in unity' becomes a characteristic property of the noetic realm that is integrated into its conception to such a degree as to count as a synonym of οὐσία, 'being' itself, perhaps a consequence of the close association of the creator god with intelligible form.

### The Receptacle

At *Tim.* 47e3 *Timaeus* proceeds from the creative activities of intellect, represented by the divine craftsman, to those carried out by intellect in cooperation with 'necessity'. It may be helpful to associate the agent 'necessity' simply with physics, more specifically, with the physical mechanisms to which the material elements in the *Timaeus* cosmos are subjected. The creative acts carried out by intellect in cooperation with necessity are thus steered by intelligent design, while the designer heeds the physical nature of the ordered elements, taking into account the potential effects of the various properties characteristic of them.

As indicated above, the four elements water, fire, earth, and air are identified by *Timaeus* as three-dimensional compounds formed by the demiurge out of elementary geometric shapes. The elements arise in what is introduced by *Timaeus* as the

*third* principle in his cosmos, alongside the noetic and sensible realms. It is problematic to grasp precisely what this third principle is. Neither intelligible nor physical in its own nature, its function is compared by Timaeus to that of a ‘receptacle’ or ‘wet nurse’ in which ‘the sensible objects always come to be ... and from which, in turn, they perish’ (*Tim.* 49a, e). Further comparisons liken the receptacle to a kind of underlying, malleable, or impressionable stuff (50c, e–51a), and to a neutral ointment base able to take on multiple fragrances (50e). In contrast to sensible objects it is the deserving recipient of the label ‘this’ and ‘that’ since it never changes in its essence (*Tim.* 50a). Timaeus likens it to underlying material, such as gold from which a statue is formed (*Tim.* 50a), but the comparison is weak since we are not to conceive of the third kind as a physical material, yet as a base upon which something is imprinted (ἐκμαγείον, *Tim.* 50c2). What are imprinted upon it are the ‘copies of the everlasting [forms]’ (τῶν ὄντων ἀειμιμήματα).<sup>53</sup> The manner in which these copies are imprinted from the forms is ‘indescribable and wonderful’ (*Tim.* 50c6). Yet it is a ‘kind’, ‘invisible and shapeless, all-receiving, partaking of the intelligible in a baffling and incomprehensible manner’ (*Tim.* 51a–b). It is grasped with the help of ‘non-sensation, with some type of counterfeit reasoning’ (λογισμῶτινι νόθῳ, *Tim.* 52b). It does not even possess that for which it has come to be (*Tim.* 52c), yet it is listed alongside being and coming to be, wherefore we arrive at ‘three different things’ (τρία τριχῆ, *Tim.* 52d4).

The image that emerges from these comparisons is that of a basic substrate whose inherent properties are its plasticity or malleability, and its three-dimensional extension. Its lack of any further characteristics serves a specific purpose. In its function as an underlying substrate the receptacle has

<sup>53</sup> The μιμήματα are sometimes conceived of as the ‘tokens’ that transmit the characteristic properties of the intelligible forms into the receptacle. The description of what enters the receptacle as ‘bodies’ (*Tim.* 50b6), however, suggests that the μιμήματα are simply three-dimensional physical objects.

to remain without essential properties in order to be able to temporarily exhibit the varying elemental natures of the physical objects that come to be and perish in it (*Tim.* 51b4–6). It appears that we ought to adopt a synthetic approach to the different functions of the receptacle. It is the space in which three-dimensional physical objects come to be and perish and, at the same time, the base that underlies the individual characteristics and properties of perishable physical objects.<sup>54</sup> As such, it falls short of explaining precisely how the intelligible forms come to interact with the sensible materials in such a manner as to effect the coming to be of sensible particulars. It merely provides the conditions, or a platform, for this process to come about.

The topics outlined above, along with the possible interpretations given, may be seen as previews or snapshots of the mesmerizingly complex reception of Plato's *Timaeus* at the hands of its interpreters. Weighing up the various interpretative difficulties that emerge in the dialogue, it appears that we ought to take *Timaeus* at his word in accepting that too close a scrutiny of some of the incongruities in the narrative is ill-advised. Had Plato intended for *Timaeus*' narrative to serve as a viable explanation of reality, why did he write the dialogue in a manner that is, quite obviously, less than coherent? Would he not have allowed his protagonist to argue his case with rather more convincingness, even if the final truth must escape the mortal reader? Be that as it may, my primary interest in the present study is to examine the responses to the interpretative

<sup>54</sup> Zeyl 2000 identifies the receptacle simultaneously as the material substrate from which physical objects are constituted and as the spatial dimension in which these appear, rejecting the idea that these two roles necessarily have to remain distinct. Similarly, Johansen 2004: 133, 'Place and matter coincide in that both are to be understood as the product of abstracting the formal characteristics of a body.' The detailed study of the Timaeian receptacle by Algra 1995: 72–120 concludes that such a twofold reading is unconvincing, considering incompatible the different portrayals of the receptacle that emerge from the dialogue: the receptacle as the extension, and thus a constitutive factor, of phenomenal bodies themselves, and the receptacle as the extension or medium through which phenomenal bodies move.

## The Receptacle

difficulties given by our Latin interpreters, and their strategies for solving them. With our focus thus shifted, we are about to open windows that look out upon divergent stages not only of the dialogue's history of transmission, but of the Platonic tradition in its entirety.