Introductory Notes on Plato's *Timaeus*

1 Background

a. Context: The Timaeus is embedded in both a real chronological sequence and a diegetic narrative sequence.

i. According to the former, it is considered a 'late' work by its author Plato. That carries with it whole hosts of assumptions about how Plato's ideas developed over time. Did he become more amenable to natural-scientific speculation at this late stage? Did this mark a shift from his apparent disregard for such questions in earlier texts like the Apology?

ii. According to the latter, the events depicted take place after those recounted in the Republic but before those of the Critias. The characters make reference back to a previous discussion, one which sounds a lot like the building of an ideal 'city of words' we find in the Republic. Likewise, the Timaeus points ahead of itself, past the speech of its titular character and onward to a subsequent speech (now or always a mere fragment) by his companion Critias, then also a third speech to conclude the trilogy (the lost or never-written *Hermocrates*).

b. Classification: The Loeb introduction characterizes the Timaeus by way of its "central Myth" about the creation of the world (*kosmos*).

i. That may or may not be a fair characterization, given that the dialogue does seem to draw a distinction between a useful mythos and a truthful logos. It's clear that Timaeus wants to frame his account as a "likely" (*eikota*) one—that is, one that operates as a 'iconographic' representation of a truer underlying *paradeigma* or model. Insofar as that's the case, then his own speech is meant to mirror the iconographic replication of a model that takes place during the constitution of the universe. (This is Osborne's point in her article.)

ii. Generically speaking, the dialogue could be classified as a work of cosmology. That is: it aims (in one way or another) to say something about the genesis and structure of the world or universe (the *kosmos* as strangely synonymous with both *pan* and *ouranos*).

iii. However, we shouldn't gloss over the clearly political context of this dialogue. It explicitly positions itself as building on the ideas outlined in the Republic—and even more especially on the clearly social-functional ideas contained therein (e.g., the guardians, division of labour, etc.). Throughout this supposedly cosmological dialogue, then, political and even ethical themes will continue to recur, often woven into arcane discussions of the origin of the universe and everything in it.

c. Characters: There are four discussants present during this dialogue.

i. Socrates

ii. Timaeus of Locri: Not much is known of this man outside of the dialogue. It seems he was a philosophically (and mathematically and astronomically) astute politician of some kind. The later tradition remembers him as Pythagorean, perhaps on the assumption that the dialogue bearing his name is Plato's attempt to reckon with a Pythagorean-style mathematized universe. But contemporary evidence for that is lacking. (Locri was located in Magna Graecia, on the toe of the Italian boot.)

iii. Critias: Critias shows up in the *Charmides* and *Protagoras*, as well. In addition to being a poet and an orator and a part-time philosopher, Critias was also a full-time tyrant during the year 404 BCE, when The Thirty seized control of Athens at the tail end of the Peloponnesian War. A later wit observed that Critias was "an amateur among philosophers, a philosopher among amateurs."

iv. Hermocrates: This is probably Hermocrates of Syracuse (in Sicily), a naval strategos ('general') who actually fought against Athens on numerous occasions. Whereas Critias would appear to wax poetic about an ideal ancient Athens repulsing Atlantian imperialism, Hermocrates actually stood against the naval imperialism of Athens. Presumably he would then have something to say in his own dialogue about how contemporary Athens compares (presumably unfavorably) to its ancient paradigm. In this case, Socrates' desire to see the ideal city 'at war' might indeed have come to a head with Hermocrates' naval dialogue. The real question is why the cosmological reverie of the Timaeus is needed to prepare the way for a poetic golden age and a subsequent excursus on warfare.

v. Note: Plato is the author, but he is not present as a character. He may in fact be the mysterious fourth guest (other than Socrates), who is absent because ill. This is the same excuse given for Plato's absence in the equally speculative *Phaedo*.

2 Opening Scene

a. After numerologically hinting at the number three, Socrates requests that his interlocutors recount the previous discussion's contents. In other words, he wants them to outline some of the more salient points from the Republic (esp. II-V). Such salient points include:

i. The division of labour in society.
ii. The requirement of a class of just guardians to preserve the *polis*.
iii. The need for the guardians to demonstrate both *thumos* and *philosophia*.
iv. The need for the guardians to replace private property with communism.
v. Equality for women in social roles.
vi. Children being held in common (via ornate mechanisms).
vii. Randomized marriage and the sorting-out of children based on type.

b. After going through all of those (carefully selected?) items, the interlocutors find out that Socrates wants to push their description of the ideal polis further. Rather than simply describing a static social structure, Socrates wants to see a dynamic polis—a city in action. This is no vague request. What he means, as he soon clarifies, is that he wants to talk about what the ideal city would look like when at war.

i. This would then fit in nicely with the Atlantis-preview here, as well as with the expanded account of golden-age Athens' war with Atlantis (Critias) and perhaps a commentary on contemporary warfare (Hermocrates).
ii. Given that the topic will be war, Socrates argues that it wouldn't be proper to start with the poets (who don't really know war, though they may pretend to) or with the Sophists (who jump from city to city, rather than staying in one to build it up and defend it). Instead, Timaeus would be the man for the job, since he's a philosophically astute politician, skilled not just in cosmology and governance but also in fighting wars.

3 Atlantis

a. Somewhat surprisingly, Timaeus doesn't get to start his speech right away, despite the fact that Socrates has singled out his expertise. Instead, Critias jumps in, all too poetically, with a long-ish story about extremely ancient history. One way or another, he thinks that more can be learned about the ideal city if we look not simply to a timeless ideal, but rather to a real historical golden age (albeit long-forgotten). And so he brings us to this ancient yarn about proto-Athens and Atlantis.
    i. The origin of this story is then traced back to Solon of Athens, one of the seven (pre-philosophical) sages, who heard it from an unnamed Egyptian priest. One of the opening insights of the priest is that the Greeks, unlike the Egyptians, are a 'perpetually young' people. That is: Greece is periodically wiped out by cataclysms which the Egyptians are able to survive. That allows the Egyptians to amass a much deeper and more authoritative historical record, while the Greeks flounder about, always thinking that whatever's happening is brand new (rather than an iteration of the past).
    ii. It is the Egyptian priest, then, who first invokes something of a cyclical view of history. The life of the world is made up of a repeating boom-bust cycle, within which states rise and fall over and over again. Some societies are privileged with this knowledge, while others live within the cycles without even realizing it.
    iii. In response to learning of this, Solon demands that the Egyptian priest share with him the fruits of Egyptian historical writing. (The ongoing existence of a writing system plays a key role here.) He demands, in fact, a historical narrative.

b. The historical narrative, it turns out, is less about Atlantis (that may be saved for the *Critias*) and more about this ancient city we'll call proto-Athens. Atlantis figures mostly as the foil for proto-Athens, which used its own virtuous constitution to beat back the Atlantian imperialists with military force.
    i. The strength of proto-Athens lay not merely in its *politeia* ('constitution'), but in the fact that its civic order was founded on a more primordial order: the cosmic order of the universe itself (*to pan*, *ho kosmos*). The strength of the polis rested on the fact that it regularized and systematized itself on the basis of the very regular system of the cosmos itself.
    ii. The structured order of the cosmos is perhaps nowhere more present than in the work of the divine causes. As we'll find out, these divine causes seem to be the heavenly bodies themselves. If we could find out everything about their structured movement, we would unlock the secrets of both divination and 'natural science' at once.
    iii. To sum up, Critias thinks that he has strengthened the account in the Republic by bringing it from there realm of 'invented fable' (*plasthenta muthon*) to 'genuine history' (*alēthinos logos*). The ideal city is thereby denigrated as 'merely' a story, whereas proto-Athens is supposedly more real because of its (clearly dubious) grounding in the historical record. Socrates greets Critias' story cheerfully, but the reader is left to wonder whether Timaeus' less-historical, more mythic-ideal approach is more in line with what Socrates wants to know. (cf. Osborne, who takes Critias' poetic intervention as a failure that Timaeus then aims to rectify.)

4 History of the Universe
   a. Timaeus, being the best astronomer present, is then tasked with discussing the origins of the cosmos and even humankind in particular. At first, it is unclear whether he will offer an historical or a mythical account. In the end, he winds up telling a "likely" account. Or, perhaps better, he tells an account that itself aims to be an icon of an underlying, timeless paradigm. (In that case, its 'mythic' quality is in no sense meant to denigrate its worth!)
      i. First Distinction: the Always-Being v. the Always-Becoming.
         1. Always-Being: object of thought via reason
            a. *To On Aei*: cf. *Ousia*
            b. Object of *Nous* via *Logos*
         2. Always-Becoming: object of opinion via non-rational sensation
            a. *To Gignomenon*: cf. *Genesis*
            b. Object of *Doxa* via *Aisthesis*
            c. *Doxa*: not simply 'opinion' in our sense, but any kind of knowledge that falls short of full certainty (cf. later use of *pistis*, faith or trust, in a similar fashion)
         3. Only the Always-Becoming needs a cause in order to exist
      ii. First Question: Has the Cosmos itself always existed or did it have a beginning? Was it created?
         1. This will be a recurring question in Greek, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thought.
         2. First Answer: the Cosmos did have a genesis, because it is visible, corporeal, sensible, and changeable. It is an object of *doxa*. Objects of *doxa* are not always the same and thus would seem to have a genesis in time.
         3. If the Cosmos is an object of *doxa* and had a genesis, then it must have a cause. We call that cause the *demiourgos agathos*: the good craftsman.
         4. The good craftsman constructs the world as an icon of an unchanging, ideal model which he has in mind: an immaterial *paradeigma*. The resulting cosmos is indeed beautiful (*kalos*).
         5. Normative Inference: the Demiurge crafted the cosmos based on an unchanging paradigm *because* the Demiurge is good and so the cosmos must be beautiful. The value judgment is woven in here, because the *telos* (purpose) is woven in, as well. That's what makes this a teleological cosmology.
         6. Demiurge does not create ex nihilo. Rather, it takes the raw chaos that exists and attempts to make it like itself—i.e., stabled, ordered, rational, in a word: good.
      iii. Second Question: Is there one cosmos or many? A Multiverse?
         1. There is only one universe, perhaps even by definition. More specifically, there is only one universe because it is an iconic copy of one perfect paradigm, which can be lacking in nothing. This perfect paradigm is itself in some sense 'alive:' it is a *Zōon*.

iv. The Shape of the Universe
    1. The Cosmos, taken as a whole, has both a soul and a body. Both are dictated by relationships of mathematical proportion, although this is more clearly the case in the invisible soul than in the visible body.
    2. The shape of the cosmos, even in its immaterial soul, is in some sense circular. But it's not just one circle. It's a sphere made up of interlinking circles—which are also in motion, revolving in different directions within one another.
    3. There is both the circle of the Same and that of the Other. The former's motion is more rational and regular than the latter's. The former's is also more uniform and continuous, whereas the Other allows for segmentation of difference.
    4. This cyclical motion of the cosmic Soul is then also mapped onto the cyclical motion of the cosmic Body—that is, the motion of the heavenly bodies.
        a. Concerning wheels in wheels, cf. Ezekiel 1 below.

5 Big Questions
- a. Is this a work of natural science or not? What else could it be? A religious work? An ethical treatise? A prelude to future politics?
- b. What is the purpose of a 'teleological' or normative approach to cosmology? That is: can we have a cosmology based on what ought to be rather than what is?
- c. Is Plato offering a definition of time?
- d. Is Plato confusing time with celestial bodies? (i.e. what moves in time and allows us to measure times…)

Ezekiel 1 (NIV)

1 In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the
Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.
2 On the fifth of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—**3** the word of
the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the
Babylonians.[a] There the hand of the LORD was on him.
4 I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing
lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, **5** and in
the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, **6** but each
of them had four faces and four wings. **7** Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf
and gleamed like burnished bronze. **8** Under their wings on their four sides they had human
hands. All four of them had faces and wings, **9** and the wings of one touched the wings of another.
Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.
10 Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side
each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an
eagle. **11** Such were their faces. They each had two wings spreading out upward, each wing touching
that of the creature on either side; and each had two other wings covering its body. **12** Each one went
straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went. **13** The
appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and
forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. **14** The creatures sped back
and forth like flashes of lightning.
15 As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four
faces. **16** This was the appearance and structure of the wheels: They sparkled like topaz, and all four
looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel. **17** As they moved, they
would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels did not change directionas
the creatures went. **18** Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all
around.
19 When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures
rose from the ground, the wheels also rose. **20** Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, and the
wheels would rise along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the
wheels. **21** When the creatures moved, they also moved; when the creatures stood still, they also stood
still; and when the creatures rose from the ground, the wheels rose along with them, because the
spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.
22 Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked something like a
vault, sparkling like crystal, and awesome. **23** Under the vault their wings were stretched out one
toward the other, and each had two wings covering its body. **24** When the creatures moved, I heard
the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty,[b] like the
tumult of an army. When they stood still, they lowered their wings.
25 Then there came a voice from above the vault over their heads as they stood with lowered
wings. **26** Above the vault over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high
above on the throne was a figure like that of a man.**27** I saw that from what appeared to be his waist
up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and
brilliant light surrounded him. **28** Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so
was the radiance around him.
This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell
facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.