

## Narrative Order and Human Status in Plato's *Timaeus*

Like the cosmos it describes, Timaeus' account of creation is divided into parts that its creator makes orderly (29 C 2; 34 B 10-C 4; 61 C 6-D 5) and proportionate (51 C 5-D 2; 90 E 3-6; 38 D 6-E 2). It is reasonable to conclude that, when Timaeus says he has recreated the cosmos in words (*Critias* 106 A 3-4), he refers to the form of his speech as well as its content (Osborne 1996; Johansen 2004: 187-88, 190). What might its form tell us about the cosmos—a god created by a god—and a human being's ability to capture it in words?

The content of Timaeus' speech tells us about the order and context of the cosmos. The divine craftsman made the cosmos good by ordering it (30 A 3-6; 53 B 5-7). He gave earth, air, fire, and water geometric shapes that made their motions regular (53 C 4-55 C 6). He composed the body of the cosmos out of proportionate combinations of these four primary bodies (31 B 3-32 C 4). He did all this, and more, to make the cosmos as much as possible like its paradigm: an intelligible cosmos that is uncreated and eternal. Timaeus also draws attention to his efforts to give his own speech an orderly and proportionate form. It is reasonable to infer from this that he intends the form of his speech to contribute to his goal of describing and explaining the order and context of the cosmos. How might it do so?

Timaeus' account of the divine craftsman's work suggests that, in order to understand the cosmos, we must know something about the mathematical structure of its parts and proportions. But Timaeus also says that, as humans, we cannot know exactly what those parts and proportions are (68 B 6-8; 68 D 2-7; 72 D 4-8). It seems that we cannot know specific details about the structure of the cosmos, but we can know the general classes of items it contains and the general principles that order them. The form of Timaeus' speech contributes to our understanding of cosmic structure and context by representing these.

For example, at least some of the divisions between the parts of the speech mark distinctions between classes. The main formal division of the speech (47 E 3-48 B 3) marks a transition from focus on reasonable causes (Reason) to focus on necessary causes (Necessity). Elsewhere, Timaeus instructs us to distinguish the two as classes of cause (46 D 7-46 E 6; 68 E 1-69 A 5). We must also recognize reasonable causes as prior ontologically (46 D 8-E 2; 68 E 6-7). This is reflected in Timaeus' order of presentation: the account of Reason precedes that of Necessity.

Describing Reason before Necessity, Timaeus departs from the chronology of his story. The section on Reason described the creation of the heavens and time. The section on Necessity "retreats" (48 B 1) to an earlier episode that (paradoxically) precedes the heavens and time (52 D 2-53 B 5). In this way Timaeus reflects, in the form of his speech, another point about cosmic order and context that is implied by its content. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, our cosmos is all that there is, and its structure may be interpreted chronologically. But Plato/Timaeus claims a broader perspective. Time is a creation pertaining only to our cosmos, which itself must be understood in the context of an intelligible cosmos that is eternal and timeless (37 D 1-7; Capra 2010: 210-11). Hence, chronology does not have the explanatory power of Reason and Necessity.

In this respect and others, Timaeus strives to represent our cosmos from the divine perspective of its craftsman. At the same time, when he uses order of presentation to represent ontological order, he acknowledges that human speech, part of the created cosmos, must of necessity have temporal sequence. Like the divine craftsman (37 D 3-7; 75 B 7-C 3), Timaeus strives for the best possible results within the limitations of his materials. As a result, the form of Timaeus' speech conveys the ontological structure and context of the cosmos, in a manner that

exemplifies its creator's advice to strive for divinity within human limitations (47 B 6-C 4; 90 C 2-4; 90 D 1-7).

### *References*

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