



Plato's *Timaeus*

The *Timaeus* presents Plato's *organicist* cosmogony, the view that the perceptible cosmos is created as a living organism out of chaos. Other aspects of Plato's organicism appear in his *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Philebus* and *Laws*. Plato's cosmology, anticipated in some respects by the Pythagoreans, dominated Western philosophy until the development of the *mechanistic worldview* in the 18th century Enlightenment. Plato's view that the cosmos is the perfect *animal* contrasts with the alternative organic worldview in some Asian and native American cosmogonies that take the *plant* as the cosmic organism (the "world tree" or "sacred tree"). The *Timaeus* was the main Platonic text in later antiquity and most of the Medieval era until some of Plato's other great works were discovered in the late Middle Ages. It has also inspired physicists like Werner Heisenberg and A.F. von Weizsäcker. Although Socrates is the main speaker in most Platonic dialogues, the main spokesperson in the *Timaeus* is Timaeus, a 5th century Pythagorean. Socrates is present but relegated by Plato to a subsidiary position.

The *Timaeus* is not so much a dialogue as a single long uninterrupted speech by Timaeus, the longest uninterrupted speech anywhere in Plato. Some have thought that Plato relegates Socrates to a subsidiary role because the subject of the dialogue, the created cosmos, is, on Plato's official view, imperfect and partially unreal. However, although Timaeus does not mention Plato's signature doctrine of Forms by name, he does refer to the eternal patterns and Socrates gives general assent to Timaeus' views.

The Form of the Intelligible Animal

Although Timaeus does not mention the Forms by name, he implies that the perceptible world is created as a living organism modelled on *the Form of the Intelligible Animal*. However, since the cosmic organism is alive, and, therefore, changing, it is an *imperfect image* of that perfect changeless Form. There is a paradox here insofar as a changing image must represent a

changeless Form. However that is the price that must be paid for the fact that the human race lives in an imperfect temporal world.

Time as the “Moving Image of Eternity”

Although the cosmos is created as perfect as any perceptible entity can be, it does contain more and less perfect parts. The *center* of the cosmos, the Earth, the home of human beings, with its straight-line motions, is less perfect than the *perfectly circular eternally repeating* celestial motions at *the cosmic periphery*, the heavens. These perfectly circular celestial motions that mark out time better approximate to the perfect Forms than the imperfect straight-line motions at the imperfect cosmic *center*. It is in this connection that Timaeus utters one of his most memorable remarks, referenced in Henry Vaughan’s poem, “The World”, that time “is the moving image of eternity.” The fact that the celestial motions constantly repeat the same perfect circles means that they provide the best possible *visible* representation of the unchanging Forms.

The Pythagorean Mathematical Paradigm

Both Plato and the earlier Pythagorean School saw mathematical order, the triumph over material chaos, as the signature of life. Leibniz also retains this view in his *Theodicy*. Ironically, this same mathematical paradigm became the model for the competing *mechanistic* view of the cosmos when, in the 18th century Enlightenment, the idea of mathematical order was separated from life and ascribed to lifeless matter.

Plato’s Microcosmic View

The *Timaeus* endorses the *microcosmic* view, adopted by Leibniz, the view that mortal living organisms within the cosmos are images of the whole cosmos (the *Macrocosm*). Each mortal living organism is a *mini-universe*, that resembles, even if imperfectly, the entire cosmos.

The “Great Chain of Being”

It is a part of Plato’s microcosmic view that there is a *hierarchy* of mortal living organisms from the lowest to the highest in the cosmos, where the higher organisms, e.g., humans, resemble the cosmos better than the lower organisms, e.g., plants. This is A.O. Lovejoy’s “Great Chain of

Being,” where Being is Life, and the more perfect beings, e.g., the more alive beings, like humans, are more real, than the less perfect, less alive, beings, like plants.

The Demiurge

The *Timaeus* holds that the cosmos is created by God (the “*Demiurge*”), but this is not the God of Christianity who creates the universe from nothing. The *Demiurge* is like a *craftsman* who shapes a product, e.g., a bed, out of materials, e.g., wood. Plato does not possess the concept of matter but, rather, employs the image from Hesiod’s *Theogony* of the cosmos being created from *chaos*. The Forms, not being *efficient* (initiating) *causes*, do not shape the cosmos but do play a role in the creation insofar as the *Demiurge* looks to them as *patterns* to guide the shaping of the cosmic chaos into a perfect organism.

The World-Soul

Since the *Demiurge* does only one thing, impose order on the primordial chaos, and since the chaotic nature of materials is always present and ready to break out, an *internal* source of order in the cosmic-organism is needed after the *Demiurge* departs. For this reason, the *Demiurge* puts a world-soul into the center of the cosmos, which then diffuses through the whole cosmos, to continue imposing order on the world after it departs. This signifies that a living organism is not merely the plaything of external events but has its own *internal telos* (internal purpose). Since the world-soul diffuses through the whole cosmos, this also means that a living organism is a *unified whole* of parts.

The Receptacle

Plato first introduces “the Receptacle,” the space where the cosmos comes into being, in the *Timaeus*. The Receptacle is, so to speak, the *womb*, the *feminine* principle, into which the *Demiurge*, representing the male principle, implants the ordering principle embodied in the eternal Forms. Space is, so to speak, the womb in which the cosmos grows. The *Timaeus* employs a *sexual model* of creation that hearkens back to the ancient Greek myths.

Emergent Evolutionism

Since the world-soul continues to introduce order into the cosmos as it grows after the *Demiurge* departs, Timaeus endorses a kind of *emergent evolutionism* (Shorey), the view that new forms appear, reflecting the unfolding of the eternal patterns on which the cosmos is modelled, as it *grows* in time. In the ancient Greek language, the word for Nature, “*physis*,” means “to grow.”

The Cosmic “Ethical” Standard in the Heavens

Although the cosmos is as perfect as a mere perceptible entity can be, it does contain more and less perfect parts. The cosmic *center*, the Earth, the home of human beings, with its chaotic motions, is less perfect than the *perfectly circular eternally repeating* celestial motions at the *cosmic periphery*, the heavens. Since the microcosmic view holds that the organisms on earth are imperfect copies of the organisms in the heavens, the celestial organisms provide the visible ethical standard for human life. Unfortunately, human beings tend to be absorbed in their dark earthly pursuits. It is noteworthy that Plato’s cosmogony provides the blueprint, requiring, to be sure, certain important modifications for its translation into a spiritual world view, for much Medieval Christian cosmogony.

Summary: Plato’s Organicism

According to the *Timaeus*, we humans on Earth live at the center of a single constantly evolving cosmic organism in whose image we have been created and whose destiny, which we share, has been fixed by the perfect patterns (Forms) from all eternity. Thus, when we observe the perfectly circular movements of the heavenly bodies, we are not seeing mere physical objects blindly following mechanical laws, but, rather, the luminous cosmic image of our own better (eternal) selves that provides the model for human ethical behavior and the good life.

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See also [emergentism](#)

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