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**PLATO'S TIMAEUS:  
TO DEMYTHOLOGIZE OR NOT TO DEMYTHOLOGIZE**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The general approach to myth since the Enlightenment is a stance that refuses to take myth at its word. The story cannot be true *prima facie*, thus it is that it must be demythologized. Those who approach the mythical must, as though peeling back the layers of an onion, look underneath the fantastical exterior of the myth to the center of truth beneath. The symbols of the myth must be decoded and turned into propositions. So we strip away the metaphorical images from the literal truths underlying them. To speak literally is to speak straightforwardly. To speak in metaphors is something like a second-order discourse.

But this perspective, though it locates our own prejudices, is not necessarily that held by the ancient philosophers and their commentators. This is not to say that the discussions of myth did not sort themselves out along lines of what we today would call the "metaphorical" and the "literal." In terms of the creation myth in Plato's *Timaeus*, some commentators felt that the truth of the story was submerged beneath layers of myth (e. g., Xenocrates, Crantor). But the understanding of the creation myth in the *Timaeus* as in some sense more straightforward was also common (e. g., Aristotle, Plutarch and Atticus; as well as patristic sources such as the Cappadocians, Clement of Alexandria, et al). However, despite this seeming alignment, this disjunctive understanding between the mythical and the literal is more distinctly modern.

In this paper I will examine the creation myth of the *Timaeus* of Plato from the standpoint

of this distinction between the "metaphorical" reading and the "literal" reading. I will show that *the Timaeus creation myth cannot be separated from its full meaning, that it cannot, in essence, be demythologized.* To do this I will need to briefly clarify what is meant by the terms myth, demythologization, literal and metaphorical. I will next briefly outline some of the arguments for a metaphorical or a literal meaning, and assessing their relative weights. But the bulk of the paper will lay the case, on the *Timaeus'* own terms, why it is that to fully understand the truth of the myth, one cannot decode it, for it is the very form of the myth that conveys its content. To dismantle the myth is to purge it of its truth.

#### **METAPHORICAL VS. LITERAL**

First, I need to clarify what I mean by the terms I will be using. By demythologizing, I mean the removing of the mythical elements of a story (or myth or narrative) so as to ascertain the factual or propositional truths (or ideas or events) symbolized by those elements. So, for example, the Persephone myth, which describes the compromise between Hades and Demeter in which Persephone will spend part of each year with Hades and part with her mother, the myth is divested of its elements to reveal an aetiology of the seasons of the year. Persephone's sojourn with Hades, and Demeter's subsequent sorrow, are decoded as the winter months; and Persephone's return to her mother, and her mother's attendant joy, symbolize the spring cycles. It is incontrovertibly true, however, that such personages as Hades, Persephone and Demeter are mere fictions, having no factual or ontological reality.

The process of demythologization is analogous to, though different from, the decoding of an allegory. An allegory, unlike a myth, is encoded in such a way so that each of the primary elements of the allegory correspond in a mostly one-to-one relationship with the things that they individually symbolize. The most famous English allegory, perhaps, is Bunyan's *Pilgrim's*

*Progress*, in which the symbols lie much closer to the surface of the narrative. But allegory, though similar in many ways to myth, differs from myth.

By myth, I am here referring to a complex narrative in which the connection between the symbols and the truths they express are not normally in a one-to-one correspondence, and that it is the interaction itself of the various symbols of the myth which provides the complex iconic structure which conveys the meaning the myth intends. So, while some mythic symbols have a meaning that lie closer to the straightforward reading of the text (e. g., the temptation narrative in Genesis, in which the tempter is symbolized by the serpent, and the Fall is the origin of sin and the disordering of nature), it is the tightly woven relationship of many other mythic symbols that lend a richness and a complexity to the myth (e. g., in the Genesis temptation narrative, the meaning underlying the crushing of the serpent's head, and the bruising of the heel of the woman's offspring, which depends on the much larger narrative of the Jewish and Christian canons and their respective traditions).

Because of modern prejudices it is tempting to equate the term "metaphorical" with mere symbolism, and the term "literal" with factual events and history. But this is too simplistic. For a literal meaning of a given text might very well indicate a symbolic interpretation (say of poetic or aphoristic literary forms), and a metaphorical meaning might derive from a purely factual event (as when the battle at the pass of Thermopylae is referred to as a turning point in Greek history). That being said, however, when speaking of the creation myth of the *Timaeus* as metaphorical, it is normally meant that the story is fictional and its true meaning is to be found in the relationships between the mythic symbols themselves as well as between the symbols and the truths they at once conceal and convey. Conversely, when speaking of the *Timaeus* myth as literal, it is normally meant that the account in some way mostly resembles what is believed to

have taken place.<sup>1</sup> Though a literalist interpretation need not espouse a position which demands the factuality of every mythic detail, nonetheless, it is an interpretation that presumes the overall factuality of the account.

My argument, however, is that this either/or dichotomy is ultimately unhelpful in terms of interpreting the *Timaeus*. One need not, indeed cannot, choose between readings which both negate the myth. But prior to the establishing of my point, it will be illustrative to sort through the arguments espousing either a metaphorical or a literal reading.

Donald Zeyl, in a helpful introduction to his translation of the *Timaeus*, summarizes the main points of the arguments.<sup>2</sup>

For proponents of a metaphorical reading, their arguments revolve around five points. Firstly, in *Timaeus*' own words, the account is merely a “likely account” (an εἰκῶς λόγος, 59d5-6), or even a “likely story” (an εἰκῶς μύθος, 29d2), and is not to be expected to be “completely and perfectly consistent and accurate” (29c5-7). That is to say, it is not intended to be presented as a mostly, or completely, factual account of the universe. It is, in other words, a story, one that is intended to be plausible, but nonetheless merely a story.

Perhaps the most powerful argument of those advocating a metaphorical reading of the *Timaeus* myth, is that specific "elements in the story are clearly mythical and produce absurdities if read literally."<sup>3</sup> Are we really to expect that the basic component of the material universe are

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1 We need not here attend to the trivial question of whether the *Timaeus* myth is itself literally true. But neither do we need attend to the less trivial question as to whether or not Plato, through his dialogic characters, believed the myth to be true. I am simply arguing that the form of the myth cannot be divorced from its meaning. Other questions, interesting as they are, are not my concern here.

2 Cf. Zeyl, "Introduction," in *Timeus*, pp. xx-xxv. Since it is my contention, which I will show below, that these arguments for a metaphorical or a literal reading are tangential to the form and content of the dialogue, I only here give them a cursory look through Zeyl's summary.

3 Zeyl, p. xxii.

innumerable triangles of different sorts? Is it really the case that women are a lesser form of men? More to the point, whether or not to take something as literal or metaphorical is not always easy to tell. Is the demiurge really something of a divine creator craftsman, or merely a symbol of the intelligence which underlies the universe? Following along these same lines of reasoning, if the precosmos, as related in the account, is to be taken literally, it commits Timaeus and his interlocutors (and us who read him) to the existence of time prior to time's generation. However, if taken metaphorically, as symbolic of time's generation, we are not faced with such difficulties.

Another difficulty which a metaphorical reading seems to solve is the creation or eternality of souls. The *Timaeus*' assertion of the creation of souls contradicts the statement in the *Phaedrus* at 245c-e<sup>4</sup> that the soul is uncreated. There is no middle ground here: either the soul is created or uncreated. By taking a metaphorical reading, however, one need not be bothered by the contradiction since one can merely assert that the *Timaeus* account is meant to be symbolic, and that of the *Phaedrus* is meant to be more literal.

One other problem that a metaphorical reading can solve has to do with the source of motion in the cosmos. In the *Phaedrus* and the *Laws*, it is asserted that the soul is the origin of all motion. However, in the *Timaeus* the source of motion is the receptacle/*chora* in the precosmos, and the motion is erratic and chaotic. Once again, we are faced with a logical contradiction. It does not appear that both statements can be true. If one takes a metaphorical reading, then, this problem disappears.

But a metaphorical reading is not the only way to resolve the tensions. A literal reading can both preserve the integrity of the *Timaeus* myth while also maintaining a coherence with the rest of the Platonic corpus.

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4 As well as a similar argument in the myth of Er in *Republic* Book X.

The first argument in favor of a literal reading begins where the metaphorical reading begins: the phrase "a likely account" or "a likely story." The qualification of "likeliness" does not necessitate a metaphorical reading. At 29c7-8 Timaeus insists that the account is "no less likely than any," which precludes any other more likely account. Again at 48d2-e1, Timaeus states:

I shall keep to what I stated at the beginning, the virtue of likely accounts, and so shall try right from the start to say about things, both individually and collectively, what is no less likely than any, more likely in fact, than what I have said before. Let us therefore at the outset of this discourse call upon the god to be our savior this time, too, to give us safe passage through a strange and unusual exposition, and lead us to a view of what is likely.

Timaeus is beginning again to come at the mythic account of creation, this time from the standpoint of necessity, and invokes divine assistance. This retelling, too, is "no less likely than any," and in fact, "more likely" than the first account. Here we have a doubling of the insistence on the plausibility of the account. The narrative itself demands of the reader that the interpretation be a literal one.

Those proponents of a metaphorical reading insisted that the contradiction of the various mythic symbols led to impossible conundrums. In their favor, those advocating a metaphorical reading have other Platonic myths to back them up. It is clearly the case that the myth of the charioteer of the soul in the *Phaedrus* has symbols which can be wed in correspondence to the truths they symbolize. The myth of the cave in the *Republic* can similarly be broken down into its constituent parts: the sun is analogous to the idea of the good which makes knowledge possible just as the sun makes seeing possible. But although many mythic elements in the *Timaeus* creation myth can be acknowledged, the nature of the myth is markedly different than other dialogues, where the metaphorical element is much more evident. It is, indeed, not so clear where to draw the line between the metaphorical and the literal.

But a literal reading can also handle some of the problems equally well, if not better than, a metaphorical reading. For example, insofar as the conundrum of “time before time” is concerned, the distinction can be explained by distinguishing between time measured by number and precosmic time as simple unmeasured temporal flow. That is to say, time as an independent entity,<sup>5</sup> and time as experienced.

Furthermore, although the *Timaeus*’ account of a created soul contradicts the *Phaedrus*’ teaching, this dilemma can be resolved by recognition that the *Phaedrus* was written prior to the *Timaeus*. Especially given that *Laws* 896a6, 899c7 and 967d6-7 help to confirm *Timaeus*’ doctrine of the created soul, it seems eminently likely that Plato has come to change his mind as to what he believed while writing the *Phaedrus*.

With regard to the difficulties with the contradictory teaching on motion, proponents of a literal reading insist the problem can be resolved by clarifying that the soul is the origin of all purposive motion, and so takes the erratic precosmic motion and orders it toward intelligence. This interpretation violates neither the integrity of the *Timaeus* myth nor that of the teaching found in the remainder of the Platonic dialogues.

Ultimately, however, what the proponents of a literal reading have going for them is the insistence by *Timaeus*, at 28b6-c3, that the cosmos has come to be, indicating it has not always existed.

Has it [the cosmos] always been? Was there no origin from which it came to be? Or did it come to be and take its start from some origin? It has come to be. For it is both visible and tangible and it has a body--and all things of that kind are perceptible. And, as we have shown,<sup>6</sup> perceptible things are grasped by opinion, which involves sense perception. As such, they are things that come to be, things that are begotten.

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5 This independent existence of time, of course, brings up its own problems, but it ought not be discounted as a Platonic supposition in the creation myth.

6 Cf. the analogy of the divided line in *Republic* Bk VI.

Though the phrase "come to be" has been shown to have varying nuances of meaning in the original Greek,<sup>7</sup> in the *Timaeus* account, it is best understood as not having previously been. So the universe comes to be, not having existed before. If proponents of a metaphorical reading would accept this disjunctive on the world's either having come to be or always having been, then they are faced with the challenge of arguing why this statement must be literal (and it seems hardly possible that they cannot but understand it literally), yet the rest metaphorical.

Ultimately, it is unhelpful to argue between a metaphorical or literal reading. There are mythical elements that cannot be pressed into a one-to-one correspondence to actual reality; it is precisely the role of these symbols to carry the mythical meaning. On the other hand, to assert that the myth is nothing but metaphor is to ignore the point of metaphor: a comparison between one entity or thing and another, in which a symbol carries the meaning of that which it symbolizes. If the metaphor of the creation myth is merely code for philosophical ideas, then what if those philosophical ideas are meant to correspond in some way to the realities they purport to encapsulate? That is to say, there must be some meaningful reality to which the metaphor points if it is to be a metaphor. But if it points to a given reality, then in what way has the metaphor ceased to be figurative and become literal?

It seems far better to accept the myth on its own terms, not to seek an alternative layer of meaning (unless the myth explicitly invites us to do so), and from the content and structure of the mythic form itself, to discern the truth it is communicating. To fail to take the myth on its own terms is to assume that we occupy a stance of knowledge in which we know better than the myth what it is that it is trying to communicate. But given our separation of some 2500 years, and depths of history, geography and culture, from the *Timaeus* and its creation myth, it seems far wiser to go to the myth ready to learn. This is my argument, and this is what I now propose to

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Zeyl, "Introduction," pp. xxviii-xxxiii.

show.

### THE LIKELY STORY

First, I will necessarily confine my attention to the creation myth of the *Timaeus* itself. I will not, for example, examine the function and place of the Atlantean myth given by Critias.<sup>8</sup> Nor will I explore the relationship of the purported trilogy of dialogues, between the unfinished *Critias* and the *Timaeus*, nor the theoretical *Hermocrates*.<sup>9</sup> I will not speculate as to the place of the *Timaeus* in the Platonic corpus. Rather, my argument is simple, to show, from the text itself, that the content of the myth of the *Timaeus* cannot be divorced from its form.

To do so I will need to explore some key passages. One of the most important ones occurs at 29b2-d3, where Timaeus begins his three speeches on the nature of the origin of the cosmos. Here he notes that the account one gives must match the subject matter about which it purports to say something.

Now in every subject it is of utmost importance to begin at the natural beginning, and so, on the subject of an image and its model, we must make the following specification: the accounts we give of things have the same character as the subjects they set forth. So accounts of what is stable and fixed and transparent to understanding are themselves stable and unshifting. We must do our very best to make these accounts as irrefutable and invincible as any account may be. On the other hand, accounts we give of that which has been formed to be like that reality, since they are accounts of what is a likeness, are themselves likely, and stand in proportion to the previous accounts, that is, what being is to becoming, truth is to convincingness. Don't be surprised then, Socrates, if it turns out repeatedly that we won't be able to produce accounts on a great many subjects--on gods or the

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8 An interesting question to pursue elsewhere would be, how is the myth of Atlantis the same or different from the creation myth, and what difference would this similarity (or difference) make in my argument? It is interesting to note that some of the same protestations as to the factuality of the Atlantean myth are made as are made for the creation myth. Cf. for example, 20d7-8, "Let me tell you a story then, Socrates. It's a very strange one, but even so, every word of it is true" and Socrates' reply, "And of course the fact that it's not made-up story, but a true account (ἀληθινὸν λόγον), is no small matter" (26e4-5).

9 These are the three dialogues that were apparently meant to make up a trilogy, though what the subject matter of the *Critias* was is unclear, perhaps a panegyric on Athenian law and *paideia*. And although it is assumed that the third dialogue was to have been the *Hermocrates*, it is unknown what the subject matter was to have been.

coming to be of the universe--that are completely and perfectly consistent and accurate. Instead, if we can come up with accounts no less likely than any, we ought to be content, keeping in mind that both I, the speaker, and you, the judges, are only human. So we should accept the likely tale on these matters. It behooves us not to look for anything beyond this.

Because the creation myth deals with the world of change and becoming, it necessarily will be told in myth, and not in more certain and stable philosophical discourse. This does not mean that the mythic account is any less true than a more straightforward rational discourse on the *ideas*,<sup>10</sup> or the forms. But it is an account which will have less precision than a discourse on the *ideas*. And as such it will be subject to *aporia*, certain impasses brought on by the nature of the mythic form, which itself mirrors the form of the protean world of the sensibles. Given this dimension of the mythic discourse, however, it is nonetheless "no less likely than any," which, *prima facie*, means that it is the most likely account one can possess of the subject matter. In fact, later during the first speech, Timaeus notes that, "We have a tendency to be casual and random in our speech [about the origin of the cosmos], reflecting, no doubt, the whole realm of the casual and random of which we are a part" (34c2-4). The nature of the reality about which Timaeus will speak necessitates an account which will yield certain problems, but it is true for all that.

Timaeus will go on through the remaining three parts of his overarching discourse to assert that this creation account is "a likely one." He points this out no less than a dozen times. In about three-quarters of these instances, he refers to the myth he is narrating as an εἰκότα λόγον, which indicates its rational nature.<sup>11</sup> In a couple of instances, the creation myth is

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10 Please note that my use of an italicized *ideas* is meant to convey, by way of transliteration, the Greek work itself, (ἰδέαι). Rather than use the Greek, as I have done for the examination of the phrases "likely account" and "likely story," I have simply used the transliteration, since the actual Greek ἰδέαι is not under consideration in my paper.

11 Though λόγος can have a large array of meanings, including as here, that of story, its overarching connotation has to do with speech, order and rationality.

referred to as an εἰκότα μῦθον, which, though indicative of a story or narrative, in its use here, and when compared to its parallel of an εἰκότα λόγον, is clearly meant to convey not a fictitious tone but an account which, though seemingly presented under fantastical forms, is nonetheless to be taken as a true account.

It will, perhaps, be helpful to walk through instances of these references to "likeness." At 30b5-7, as he is getting underway in the first speech and describing how the cosmos is a living soul endowed with intelligence, Timaeus says, "He [the demiurge] wanted to produce a piece of work that would be as excellent and supreme as its nature would allow. This, then, in keeping with our likely account (κατὰ λόγον τὸν εἰκότα), is how we must say divine providence brought our world into being as a truly living thing, endowed with soul and intelligence." Note carefully, the nature of Timaeus' theme demands that what he says is "how we must say" divine providence created the world. The mythic form is constrained by the reality of the tale it tells.

At 44d1, Timaeus begins to discuss the body and how various bodily parts came to be. He notes, "In discussing these questions, we shall hold fast to what is most likely (τοῦ μάλιστα εἰκότος ἀντεχομένοις), and proceed accordingly." Here we again have the assertion that the tale told adheres to the rubric of "what is most likely."

Another central passage to consider occurs as Timaeus is beginning to retell the myth of creation from the standpoint of necessity. He affirms, "I shall keep to what I stated at the beginning, the virtue of likely accounts (τὴν τῶν εἰκότων λόγων δύναμιν), and so shall try right from the start to say about things, both individually and collectively, what is no less likely than any, more likely (μηδενὸς ἦττον εἰκότα, μᾶλλον δέ), in fact, than what I have said

before" (48d1-3). For the second time, Timaeus has affirmed that the creation myth he is espousing is the most likely way to speak about the origin of the cosmos. Timaeus then goes on immediately to say, "Let us therefore at the outset of this [second] discourse call upon the god to be our savior this time, too, to give us safe passage through a strange and unusual exposition, and lead us to a view of what is likely (τὸ τῶν εἰκότων δόγμα; lit., to a likely dogma)" (48d4-7).

As Timaeus undertakes this second retelling of the creation myth, dealing now with the basic elements/elementals of the cosmos, he notes the problem with which he is confronted. "What problem then, do they [the primary elements] present for us to work through in likely fashion? And then how and in what manner are we to go on speaking about this third kind [i.e., the receptacle (ὑποδοχή) or space/*chora* (χωρά)]?" (49b6-7). The very nature of the subject matter must presents problems that must be worked through plausibly. His account purports to do that.

At 53b5ff, Timaeus begins to describe how the elemental bodies acquired their respective shapes. He notes that his "account will be an unusual one" (53c1), but that his well-schooled listeners will follow him. He then goes on to refer to his account, "This, then, we presume to be the originating principle of fire and of the other bodies, *as we pursue our likely account* (εἰκότα λόγον) in terms of Necessity" (53d4-6 emphasis added). When the question of how many worlds there are, Timaeus replies, "Well, our 'likely account' (εἰκότα λόγον) answer declares there to be but one world . . ." (55d4-5). At 56a1, when discussing the kinds of bodies and assigning the more solid body to the elemental earth, he notes, "Hence, if we assign this solid figure to earth, we are preserving our 'likely account' (εἰκότα λόγον)." Here again, in these instances, it is the nature of the subject matter that constrains the form of the discussion. The

form is a "likely account," as distinguished from (noted above) a more stable and rational account in terms of the unchanging *ideas*. This is again reinforced, after the discussion on the kinds of elemental bodies, when Timaeus says, "Given all we have said so far . . . the following account is the most likely (τὸ εἰκὲς μάλιστα ἄν)" (55e8-56d1). At 57d3-6, Timaeus again asserts, "That is why when they [the primary elemental bodies] are mixed with themselves and with each other, they display an infinite variety, *which those who are to employ a likely account* (εἰκτι λόγω) in their study of nature ought to take note of (emphasis added)." We see it again, near the end of the dialogue as a whole, at 90e6-91a1, where Timaeus is discussing the emergence of the rest of the living things after man. He begins, "Let us proceed, then, to a discussion of this subject in the following way. According to our likely account (κατὰ λόγον τὸν εἰκότα) . . ." at which point he then proceeds to tell how the other living thing derived from man. In all these instances, the nature of the mythic narrative is constrained by the subject matter about which it tells.

To this point, when referring to the likeliness of his account, Plato has, through Timaeus, used the term λόγος. But in a couple of places in the second of the Timaeian speeches, a different term is used: μύθος. For example, Timaeus proceeds in his second discourse, to move from discussion about the elementals and the physical entities they give rise to. He affirms, "As for going further and giving an account of other stuffs of this sort *along the lines of the likely stories* (τῶν εἰκτων μύθων) we have been following, that is no complicated matter" (59c5-7 emphasis added). This use of the word for "story" in place of the more usual λόγος is seconded at 68c7-d2 (emphasis added), where Timaeus, in his discussion of the colors represented to the capacity of sight, counsels, "As for the other hues, it should be fairly clear from the above cases

by what mixtures they are to be represented *in a way that preserves our 'likely story'* (τὸν εἰκότα μῦθον)." In looking at how μῦθος is used in these two places, it is clear that Plato, through the Timaeon monologue, is not using it in any appreciably different way than he has been using λόγος. In other words, though μῦθος is less connotative of order and reason as is λόγος, here the two terms are both employed to speak of a plausible state of affairs, of a mythic story that matches the reality it depicts.

In the final Timaeon discourse, Plato returns to using the descriptor "likely account." We see it first at 72d4-8, where Timaeus is punctuating the discussion on the soul up to that point.

He says:

So, as for our questions concerning the soul--to what extent it is mortal and to what extent divine; where its part are situated, with what organs they are associated, and why they are situated apart from one another--that the truth has been told is something we could affirm only if we had divine confirmation. *But that our account is surely at least a "likely" one* (τό γε μὴν εἰς ἡμῶν εἰρησθαί) is a claim we must risk, both now and as we proceed to examine the matter more closely." (emphasis added)

Just as was noted above in my discussion of the passage at 29b2-d3, so here, too, Timaeus reinforces that it is the nature of the subject matter that constrains the form of the account. Only one who has divine knowledge and understanding could confirm the unvarnished reality of what Timaeus has asserted about souls. But lacking that divine confirmation, the Timaeon account is "surely at least a 'likely' one." It is also worth noting that twice, at the outset of the three speeches as a whole, and at the beginning of the second speech, the invocation of divine assistance is made. Seemingly, then, Timaeus is noting the divine *imprimatur*, of a sort, on his account.

I have been discussing various passages which utilize the words εἰκός and εἰκότερον,

derived from ἔοικα (\*εἶκα), "to be like" (with a related word εἰκών, image or likeness). The word, εἰκός, has to do with likelihood and probability. It is not a word that asserts logical necessity (to which, in logical discourse, it provides an antonym), but emphasizes probability. If the cosmos were to come to be in any way, Timaeus has asserted, this is the most likely way it would come to be. Once again, this fits completely with the account of the creation myth in the *Timaeus*.

To this point we have discussed several passages which emphasize the nature of the creation myth as "a likely account." It would be important at this point to also take notice of the overall larger structure of the myth in its three retellings.

The three speeches Timaeus gives on the creation of the cosmos are dedicated to giving an account of the creation of the universe from the perspective of intellect (29d-47e) and necessity (47e-69a), in the first two accounts, and the cooperation of intellect and necessity in the creation of soul and body (69a-92c) in the final speech. Each account begins, as I noted above, with the reiteration that what follows will be according to the most likely account that can be given according to the specific subject matter.

The creation of the universe in the first discourse then, asserts that "it is impossible for anything to come to possess intelligence apart from soul. Guided by this reasoning, he [the demiurge] put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, and so he constructed the universe" (30b3-5). So the first speech deals with creation in forms amenable to a discussion of intellect. This is why the formation of the world soul is explicated in terms of mathematical proportions (cf. 35a1-36d7).

The second discourse must move on from the perspective of intellect to that of necessity. Timaeus begins, "But I need to match this account by providing a comparable one concerning

the things that have come about by Necessity. . . . I shall have to retrace my steps, then, and, armed with a second starting point that also applies to these same things, I must go back once again to the beginning and start my present inquiry from there, just as I did with my earlier one" (47e4-5, 48a4-b3). The discussion is going to have to take account of a mixed world, one the offspring of the union of intellect and necessity. "Intellect prevailed over Necessity by persuading it to direct most of the things that come to be toward what is best, and the result of this subjugation of Necessity to wise persuasion was the initial formation of this universe" (48a2-5). The account, then, will have to take on something of a different form so as to discuss the creation from this new vantage point. This is precisely why, then, the discussion begins with an account of the coming to be of the elemental properties from the receptacle (or, as it is later called, space), and how their physical properties are derived from an intellectual account of triangles and their relationships to one another. Here the demiurge establishes not just proportionality upon the cosmos, but also order and regulative motion.

The third discourse again starts over, but gives a much more summarily concise account of the cosmos' origins, and takes up the bulk of its account from the standpoint of physiological and psychological phenomena. Timaeus has sorted through the various causes (divine/intellect and necessary, as well as auxiliary causes of order and proportionality), and these then "lie ready for us like lumber for carpenters" (69a6). He exhorts his listeners, "Let us try to put a final 'head' on our account, one that fits in with our previous discussion" (69b1-2). Here the creation account will take on the previous form of the speech on necessity and creation, though it will explore much further the physiology and psychology of the previous discussions.

So, in the *Timaeus*, we have three retellings (or, at any rate, two and a half) of the creation myth. Each account is repeatedly characterized as "a likely account" and repeatedly we

are told that each account is matched to its subject matter. The form of the myth conveys the content it is describing. It is my contention, based on this examination of the text of the *Timaeus* itself, that the myth of creation cannot be "demythologized," that the form of the myth is necessary for the conveyance of the meaning of its content. What I will now argue for is that by demythologizing the creation myth of the *Timaeus* one loses the very content one seeks.

#### **FORM IS CONTENT**

But the question remains, why may we not demythologize the creation text? After all, it can hardly be the case that Plato himself believed his own creation accounts. These are fictional narratives in which he is pursuing inquiry into the metaphysical realities of the cosmos. The repeated assertion of Critias and Timaeus as to the veracity of their stories notwithstanding, these are presented in the context of a round of story telling. Socrates' gift of the long discourse on the *Republic* is here being repaid by the subsequent gifts of discourse given by Critias and Timaeus. These are not presented as infallible explanations of the universe's origins.<sup>12</sup> Could it not be the case, then, that Plato is engaging in some intentional irony, which would invite us, then, to dig beneath the myth for the substance of the truth it conveys?

I do not think so. I do not think the fact, which I accept, that Plato did not accept the Timaeian myth as in some sense actually corresponding to the reality of the cosmos' origins, necessitates that the whole myth is to be demythologized. Rather, it seems to me, just as the dialogue form is necessary for Plato's overall philosophic enterprise, the mythic form of the creation account is necessary for his philosophical cosmology. It is possible that Plato understood the creation of the cosmos at the hands of the demiurge something like a real complex of events, after all, the account of the demiurgic creation was accepted by various

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<sup>12</sup> Even given the invocations of divine assistance at the beginnings of the first and second discourses.

religious sects (such as the Gnostics) in the late antique world, and it is not too much of a stretch to think that Plato himself may have believed it as well. Still, the mythic accounts are given with the explicit explanations that the form of the account is to match the philosophical speculation of the subject matter. The mythic form is the philosophical contemplation.

If one were to dismantle these forms, with what would one be left? Let us take away the world soul as a mixture of Being, the Same, and Different, and the attendant proportionalities which originate the shape and motion of the soul. What is left? Precisely nothing. For the very things we would "demythologize" from the myth convey the very philosophical speculations we seek; namely, the relationship of being to sameness and difference (and thus about ontology and identity), and the understanding that proportional relationships are somehow inherent in the cosmos (which Newton and other Enlightenment scientists have testified to). Let's take away the account of the primary elementals and the triangular relationships which determine their shape and ability to transmutate into one another. With what are we left? Again, nothing. For the very philosophical speculation we seek about the relationship of physical bodies is explicated by the very mythic forms which we have jettisoned in our quest for demythologization.

But I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not suggesting that Plato's account of order, motion and the relationship of bodies is actually correct in the physical sense. I am not suggesting that there really was a demiurge which looked upon the *ideas* and from them constructed a physical cosmos. Rather I am arguing that the philosophical speculation we seek to know in Plato regarding the creation of the world--regardless of its correspondence or lack thereof to modern scientific conceptions of cosmology and physics--is fundamentally found in the mythic forms which make up his Timaeon cosmology.

Therefore, given the above considerations, despite the difficulties presented with a

"straightforward" reading<sup>13</sup> of the *Timaeus* myth, it is this sort of reading, one which takes the mythic forms as they are and seeks to reason from them and not from some supposed more rational and essential narrative core, on balance the proper approach. Clearly Plato intended the message to be conveyed via myth. To demythologize is to miss the import of the truth the myth communicates *in its very form*. It also imposes on the text an understanding foreign to Plato, and very much risks going astray from Plato's meaning.<sup>14</sup>

As I have reiterated above, however, this is not to say that Plato intends the myth to be read "literalistically," assuming the reality of a demiurge or of the receptacle/*chora* in the exact way presented in the text. Rather, it is only the mythic setting of the *Timaeus* creation account that could most adequately communicate the truth Plato had in mind, and that there was some reality that was *like* a demiurge (a creating principle) or the receptacle (a place of generation) seems to be what is meant, if not the literalistic reality of the exact picture presented in the myth.

In essence, then, it seems to me that the myth presented in the *Timaeus* is analogous in relationship to the truth it communicates as the sensible world is to the *ideas*, or forms.<sup>15</sup> The sensible world is real, but not in the way the *ideas* are. The *ideas* are first encountered through the sensibles, and the truth the myth communicates is begun to be known through the mythic contents. The myth educates the soul so as to turn it from the sensibles to the realities they instantiate.

## CONCLUSION

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13 As distinguished from either a metaphorical or literal reading, as the rest of the sentence states.

14 An example of how one might go astray might be revealed in cutting out the account of the origination of the shapes of physical bodies from the relationship and amassing of triangular substances. One would only then be left with some sort of vague notion of the primary elementals and their relationships but fail to understand how it is that they "transmutate" (or in the case of earth, cannot do so), and what this sort of motion means to the relationships of physical necessity between the primary elements and the bodies which originate from them.

15 Cf. 29b2-d3 cited above.

I began this paper with the assertion that the approach to the *Timaeus* which involves an Enlightenment-style of demythologization is a failed one. As I noted, demythologization seeks to peel back the layers of a myth so as to get at the primary rational idea or set of ideas around which the myth has been constructed. While this approach is not to be dismissed absolutely,<sup>16</sup> after all, it is appropriate to look at many myths from this vantage point, it has been my contention throughout this paper that such a project fails to take seriously the actual text of the *Timaeus*, and further will miss the point of the Timaeian creation myth altogether.

After some initial cursory considerations of the argument for either a literal or a metaphorical reading of the *Timaeus*, both of which I submit are failed enterprises, I examined the text of the *Timaeus* both in the more than a dozen specific instances in which it asserts to be the most plausible account of the creation of the world, as well as in the three large movements in which the creation account is taken up from three vantage points. This examination showed that the very content and structure of the Timaeian cosmologies cannot be separated from the meaning they intend to convey. I then summarized my argument by showing how the use of demythologization can lead the reader astray from what the *Timaeus* intends to communicate.

I submitted that the use of the myth in the *Timaeus* is analogous to the way the sensibles operate in inviting us to a deeper reflection on the *ideas* they instantiate. One cannot merely dispense with the sensibles which instantiate beauty to get behind them to the *idea* itself. Rather, the sensibles are necessary to inaugurate the *paideia* of soul in the rational human being. The mistake is not in the use of the sensibles, but in assuming that the sensibles are the beginning and end of one's quest for knowledge.<sup>17</sup> In a similar way, it has been my contention in the paper, that

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<sup>16</sup> I alluded to a couple of Platonic myths (the charioteer of the soul and Plato's cave) in which the various elements are very much indeed meant to correspond one-to-one to a specific entity or reality.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. especially *Republic* Bks VI-VII.

the mythic forms are not so readily dispensed with so as to get at the primary intellectual realities conveyed through the mythic forms. Rather, these forms inaugurate the quest for knowledge about the origins of the cosmos. By paying attention to the mythic forms themselves, we as readers can come to a better understanding of the truth that Timaeus (and Plato through him) is trying to convey. Granted, the mythic forms lack consistency and stability. They raise problems and logical contradictions. But this is no different than the experience we have of the natural world of changing images which come to be. Despite this instability and capacity to lead astray, it is only possible to cull the truth about the origins of the cosmos from the mythic forms presented in the *Timaeus*. This is why taking the myth as it is, is far the richer means toward greater philosophical knowledge.

Ultimately, then, the proper approach to interpreting the *Timaeus* is to pay attention to the forms of the myths as they themselves are the very conveyors of the meanings they intend to communicate. One need not get behind or underneath the mythic forms, but rather must take seriously what it is that they say and the way in which they say it. This is the most fruitful approach, for it will offer up a richer meaning of Plato's cosmology.

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