

# Plato's Timaeus and the Latin Tradition by Christina Hoenig

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*Plato's Timaeus and the Latin Tradition* by Christina Hoenig

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After enumerating several recent works on the *Timaeus*, all in English and almost all belonging to the same interpretative family, Christina Hoenig explains in her introduction that “the present examination focuses on the development of Platonic philosophy at the hands of Roman writers between the first and the fifth century BCE” [5]. This is the period when Platonists cut off their connections with the probabilist New Academy, and in which a new dogmatism was established, with Greek philosophy continuing to enjoy great popularity within the Roman élite.

This book contains five chapters: the first is on the *Timaeus* and its interpretation, while the others are on Cicero, Apuleius, Calcidius, and Augustine. In the first chapter, the *Timaeus* is situated in a dualist metaphysical context which considers that true reality is to be found at the level of the intelligible, of which things are mere images. The narrative method of the *Timaeus* remains ambiguous: one cannot choose between λόγος and μῦθος, for the story concerns the origin of the sensible world, which is a mere image (εἰκός) of the intelligible. Adopting a position on this question requires choosing between a literal and a metaphorical reading of this story about the origin of the world. A similar ambiguity concerns the identity of the demiurge, who is considered either as a separate intellect or as the intellect of the soul of the world. Finally, χώρα, bereft of any property, is considered as the basic substrate of change. Ultimately, “the Timaeian narrative portrays the universe as a teleologically structured whole” [17]. These are interpretative presuppositions that should be discussed within the context of a commentary on the *Timaeus*, but which cannot all be taken into consideration in the context of this book.

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Cicero succeeds in reconciling his activity as an orator with his translation of the *Timaeus*, of which only fragments remain. His reading of *Timaeus* 29b2–d3 allows him to give to the term «εἰκώς» the meaning of «πιθανόν» (*probabile* or *veri simile*) in accordance with the definition of rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias* and, especially, in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* [1356b ff.]. Nevertheless, one must not separate what remains of Cicero's translation of the *Timaeus* from what we find in his philosophical treatises. In both cases, we encounter the previous controversies concerning this treatise on the origin of the world, taking into account the criticisms by Aristotle, by Stoics, and by Epicureans. Cicero advocates an interpretation of the term «ἀρχή» that tends toward a temporal origin of the world, which implies the hypothesis of a new design (*novum consilium*) in a demiurge who is supposed to be an immutable divinity. Cicero thereby distinguishes himself from the probabilism of Carneades, and seems closer to thinkers like Philo of Alexandria.

Apuleius takes his place within the dogmatic interpretation of Plato that was customary in the second century AD. For him, Platonic doctrine develops according to a well-defined program which moves from ethics to physics, and finally to theology, that is, to metaphysics. The acquisition of philosophical knowledge is assimilated to the celebration of the mysteries, as is implied by the vocabulary of the *Phaedrus* or the *Symposium*. Apuleius, who was a rhetor, thus becomes the high priest of this cult [112]. We therefore find in him a mixture of rhetoric, philosophical dogmatism, and religion, which can be explained by the fact that he assimilates dialectic to genuine rhetoric. Nevertheless, in the treatise *On the World*, attributed to Aristotle, which Apuleius was said to have translated, we find the essential points of the interpretation that he proposes for the *Timaeus*, in that he attempts to carry out a synthesis between a temporal origination of the world and its everlasting existence. It is the insertion of the harmony between the elements that ensures the eternity of the world, a harmony that is maintained by providence and which implies a highly elaborate demonology.

We find a similar interpretative scheme in Calcidius, whose identity is impossible to determine. It seems that Osius, Calcidius' sponsor, had merely ordered him to translate the *Timaeus*. Yet Calcidius, whose mother tongue must have been Greek, translated only the cosmological part of the dialogue, to which he added a commentary in order to shed light on its subject matter. The commentary reveals the influence of Numenius and probably of Porphyry, the disciple of Plotinus, who was accused of having plagiarized Numenius. As a Christian, Calcidius could not help but militate in favor of a temporal origin of the world. For him, the whole problem consisted in

reconciling the image of a transcendent divinity with the idea of a material world structured by providence. In interpreting *Timaeus* 28c3–5, Calcidius discovers a triadic structure: at the summit one finds the *summus deus*; then comes providence, which imitates the goodness of the first god and introduces it into the world; finally comes fate, which depends on providence, which the soul of the world obeys. This is, moreover, why demons no longer play their traditional role of carrying out the designs of providence and destiny. Calcidius finds clear confirmation of this in the passage from the *Timaeus* concerning the four kinds of living beings that must be included within the complete living being [39e10–40d5]: a celestial kind [39d7–8], that of the demons, and three terrestrial kinds—living beings that fly, those that swim, and those that walk the Earth. The demons are rational, immortal living beings, subject to passions and made of aether, who take care of human beings. As is the case in the *Epinomis*, there are several kinds of demons living in different places.

Augustine uses Cicero's translation of the *Timaeus* to corroborate the Christian tradition of creation and to oppose the interpretation of the Platonists. What Augustine says about the creation of the world and the salvation of the soul is inspired by the interpretative tradition of the *Timaeus* in Cicero and in Apuleius. Moreover, his interpretation of Genesis 1:1 features several points that are akin to what one finds in Calcidius, which suggests that he may have made use of the same source. Basically, Augustine believes that Plato, who defends a coherent system, borrows his physics and his theology from Pythagoras, and his ethics and dialectics from Socrates. In Augustine, creation features three moments. The first stage of creation is atemporal, since it is Jesus Christ, son of God the Creator, who cannot be situated within time. What follows, however, is temporal: on the first day, God creates the angels; then, during the following days, comes the turn of sensible things. The first two stages, described as creation (*conditio*), are beyond human sensation and knowledge. The third stage, in which sensible things appear, is called *administratio* and is partially open to human knowledge. As we can see, this account of creation is a patchwork which associates Christian revelation with the essential elements of Platonism. In particular, it allows one to reconcile the transcendence of the Creator with providence, a problem which the Middle Platonists had to confront. To solve this metaphysical problem, Augustine makes the figure of Christ a mediator between the divine and the human world. This mediating status of Christ leads Augustine to devalue the beings that established a bridge between the sensible and the intelligible. This is why he undertakes to show that what

Apuleius says about demons as mediators between the mortal and the divine must be rejected, as must the tripartite division god, man, and demon.

This book, which partially takes up a thesis defended at Cambridge (UK) in 2012, is less rich than the one by Stephen Gersh [1986] because it deals with a smaller number of authors and focuses only on the interpretation of the *Timaeus*, which was the paradigmatic dialogue for Platonists at the time. Yet this work is well written, well structured, and very clear. It contributes a great deal on the history of the influence of Platonism among Latin philosophers. The translations, which the author has made of Greek and Latin texts, printed in two facing columns, are very useful for following the course of the exposition, which definitely shows how a translation from Greek into Latin is based on an interpretation which in turn makes the manner of translating the text evolve. Finally, it should be noted that most of the contemporary interpreters of Plato's *Timaeus* often understand the dialogue as the Middle Platonists did, which gives this volume a genuine currency.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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