Chapter Five
Understanding the *Timaeus*

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Until relatively recent times the *Timaeus* was considered one of the most important, if not the most important of the dialogues of Plato. Why this was the case is not difficult to explain. To those, including many fathers of the church, who were already convinced of the operation of divine providence in the world, of the primacy of soul over body, of the basic triumph of the forces of good over the forces of evil, and of the existence and importance of human free-will, the *Timaeus* must have seemed a corroborative document of the first order. For here was a treatise from pagan antiquity that no antagonist could stigmatize as prejudiced in favour of the new religion stating in the clearest of terms, and backing with an impressive show of argument, just such a set of beliefs, and many more that co-incided remarkably with other basic tenets of early Christian theology. Much, to be sure, did not, but what remained was enough to ensure that the *Timaeus*, along with the *Phaedo*, with its purported proofs of the immortality of the soul, would constitute a vital thread in the skein of a developing christian apologetic.

While much happened to the *Timaeus* across the centuries -- a paper if not a book in itself -- its basic seriousness was never doubted, even by those, like Aristotle, who found themselves in basic opposition to much that it contained. Whatever the dialogue espoused, no one doubted that the views in question were those of Plato himself, even if from the beginning there was disagreement among commentators as to what exactly those views were. All this changed in our own century. In a major commentary which appeared in 1928, A.E. Taylor\(^1\) argued that the views espoused in the dialogue were, far from being those of Plato himself, in fact an amalgam of elements of fifth-century Empedocleanism, Pythagoreanism, and other physical and medi-

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cal theory from that epoch. This view, as it happened, won few supporters, but a second one, that of Professor G.E.L. Owen, first propounded in 1953, continues to persuade many. According to this theory, the contents of the *Timaeus* are indeed the views of Plato himself, but are of little or no philosophical worth, since the dialogue was clearly written during what Professor Owen once trenchantly described to me as Plato's "mad" period, that is, the period when he adhered to a belief in the theory of Forms.

As was mentioned above, the view of Professor Taylor has convinced very few, and its refutation by F.M. Cornford in 1937 effectively buried it. Owen's thesis has proved more durable, despite a major attempt to re-instate orthodoxy by Professor Harold Cherniss in 1957. My own view - to state my prejudices at once -- is that the *Timaeus* may well be from the central period of Plato's writing life, as Owen argued, but that much of what it contains is of major philosophical significance despite that. What I should like to do here is briefly summarize the contents of the dialogue, comment on what Plato means by calling those contents "likely," not certain, and then pass on via a short but important discussion of methodology in the interpretation of the dialogue to an account of some of its key assertions and of what seems to me their continuing philosophical importance. I shall conclude with a brief discussion of what strike me as a couple of major weaknesses in Plato's argumentation.

Structurally, the dialogue falls into three parts, preceded by an important introduction. In this introduction Timaeus, speaking one can assume for Plato, outlines as a basis for any discussion of the nature of the physical universe a distinction that had figured prominently in *Republic* 5, that between a Form, "which is always real and never comes into existence," and a physical

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