

DIVINE CONFIRMATION: PLATO, *TIMAEUS* 55C7–D6*

ABSTRACT

Burnet's text at Pl. Ti. 55c7–d6 is at least questionable, and opting for a different reading at 55d5 (θεός instead of θεόν) would shed light on an intriguing argumentative aspect of Plato's cosmological account: God confirms the metaphysical reasons why there is just one perfect world.

Keywords: ancient philosophy; Plato; *Timaeus*; cosmology; theology; textual tradition

This paper aims to show that Burnet's text at Pl. *Ti.* 55c7–d6 is at least questionable, and that opting for a different reading at 55d5 would shed light on an intriguing argumentative aspect of Plato's cosmological account.

The *Timaeus* encompasses a direct argument for the uniqueness of the world: at 30c–31b, Timaeus points out that the uniqueness and completeness of the sensible world depends on the fact that it is an image of the complete intelligible living being.¹ This, in turn, is explicitly related to the intellect which is the cause of the world, that is, the Demiurge: the reason why one can be certain that the world is shaped according to a perfect intelligible paradigm is that God is good and wants his creation to be as beautiful as possible. Hence the reader is struck when, at 55c–d, Timaeus says:

ἃ δὴ τις εἰ πάντα λογιζόμενος ἐμμελῶς ἄποροί πότερον ἀπείρους χρῆ κόσμους εἶναι λέγειν ἢ πέρας ἔχοντας, τὸ μὲν ἀπείρους ἡγήσασαί τ' ἂν ὄντως ἀπείρου τινὸς εἶναι δόγμα ὧν ἔμπειρον χρεῶν εἶναι, πότερον δὲ ἓνα ἢ πέντε αὐτοὺς ἀληθεία πεφυκότας λέγειν ποτὲ προσήκει, μᾶλλον ἂν ταύτη στάς εἰκότως διαπορήσαι. τὸ μὲν οὖν διη παρ' ἡμῶν ἓνα αὐτὸν κατὰ τὸν εἰκότα λόγον πεφυκότα μηνύει θεόν, ἄλλος δὲ εἰς ἄλλα πη βλέψας ἕτερα δοξάσει. καὶ τοῦτον μὲν μεθετέον, ...

Now if anyone, taking all these things into account, should raise the pertinent question, whether the number of worlds should be called indefinite or limited, he would judge that to call them indefinite is the opinion of one who is indeed indefinite about matters on which he ought to be definitely informed. But whether it is proper to speak of them as being really one or five, he might, if he stopped short there, more reasonably feel a doubt. Our own verdict, indeed, declares the world to be by nature a single god, according to the reasonable [Cornford: probable] account; but another, looking to other considerations, will judge differently. He, however, may be dismissed ...²

* I am grateful to the anonymous reader, whose suggestions helped me to substantially improve my argument.

¹ Scholars disagree about whether this refers to the intelligible realm as a whole, or to the form of the living being: D. Keyt, 'The mad craftsman of the *Timaeus*', *Philosophical Review* 80 (1971), 230–5; R. Parry, 'The unique world of the *Timaeus*', *JHPH* 17 (1979), 1–10; R. Parry, 'The intelligible world-animal in the *Timaeus*', *JHPH* 29 (1991), 13–32; R. Patterson, 'The unique worlds of the *Timaeus*', *Phoenix* 35 (1981), 105–19; D. Sedley, *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London, 2007), 108 n. 36; K. Theil, 'The life forms and their model in Plato's *Timaeus*', *Rhizai* 2 (2006), 241–73.

² Translation from F.M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1937), modified.

The puzzle is not only why Timaeus might want to provide a new argument in favour of the uniqueness of the world but, above all, that, while at 30c–31b he concluded without any doubt that there is only one world, here he seems to be sceptical about the firmness of this conclusion; after all, he seems to declare that according to the reasonable account (κατὰ τὸν εἰκότα λόγον) one *might* consider it true that five worlds exist. This difficulty notwithstanding, the text established by Burnet, which I have quoted in Cornford's translation, has been accepted by virtually all translators apart from Rivaud.³ To the best of my knowledge, Burnet's choice has never been submitted to criticism, whereas I would argue that, from a philological point of view, it is at least questionable.

Burnet's text (henceforth, text F)	Alternative text (henceforth, text A)
τὸ μὲν οὖν διή παρ' ἡμῶν ἓνα αὐτὸν κατὰ τὸν εἰκότα λόγον πεφυκῶτα μηνύει θεόν , ἄλλος δὲ εἰς ἄλλα πη βλέψας ἕτερα δοξάσει.	τὸ μὲν οὖν διή παρ' ἡμῶν ἓνα αὐτὸν κατὰ τὸν εἰκότα λόγον πεφυκῶτα μηνύει θεός , ἄλλος δὲ εἰς ἄλλα πη βλέψας ἕτερα δοξάσει.
Our own verdict, indeed, declares the world to be by nature a single god , according to the reasonable account; but another, looking to other considerations, will judge differently.	Hence, in our circumstances, according to the reasonable account God declares that the world is by nature one; but another, looking in some way to other considerations, will judge differently.
θεός AVC <i>versio Armeniaca</i> : θεόν F Philoponus <i>De aet. mund.</i> 13.18 (532.24–533.7 Rabe) : om. g	

Let us first briefly consider the textual tradition. Burnet in his edition considered as primary witnesses for the *Timaeus* not only A (Par. gr. 1807, late ninth century), F (Vind. suppl. gr. 39, before 1355) and Y (Vind. phil. gr. 21, late thirteenth/early fourteenth century) but also P (Vat. Pal. 173) and Vat. (Vat. Gr. 228). However, Jonkers has recently demonstrated that the manuscript tradition of the *Timaeus* is based on seven primary witnesses, but that P and Vat. are not among them.⁴ More specifically, besides A and F, there are: V (Vind. phil. gr. 337, fifteenth century, from 34b4), a *gemellus* of A but contaminated with ancestors of C and F; C (Tubingensis Mb 14, eleventh century), which is closer to F but has been contaminated with an ancestor of A and V; and, along with Y, Θ (Vat. gr. 226, early fourteenth century) and Ψ (Par. gr. 2998, 1273–83), which depend on the same antigraph as Y and are closer to the line of F, still characterized by contamination—this group is indicated by the letter g.⁵ Hence anyone dealing with the text of the *Timaeus* ought to be wary of mechanically applying stemmatic principles: a reading found in only one manuscript may be correct against all other primary witnesses, and editors ought to take indirect

³ A. Rivaud, *Platon. Œuvres complètes, Tome X. Timée – Critias* (Paris, 1925).

⁴ G. Jonkers, *The Textual Tradition of Plato's Timaeus and Critias* (Leiden and Boston, 2017), 203–5, 206–13.

⁵ Jonkers's conclusions have been widely accepted by reviewers: C.G. King, *CR* 68 (2017), 363–5; S. Martinelli Tempesta, *Anzeiger für die Altertumswissenschaft* 70 (2017), 173–80; D.J. Murphy, *Exemplaria Classica* 22 (2018), 233–7.

testimonies into account too. As a consequence, in our passage we should consider the evidence not just of Philoponus but also of the Armenian translation, which was produced on the basis of a manuscript related to A.⁶

In our passage both θεός and θεόν are well attested. C's support of A cannot be decisive, since it may be due to contamination. V's agreement with A testifies to the fact that text A was in their common, late antique antigraph, and the support of the Armenian translation confirms (at least) that this is how the line was read.⁷ On the other hand, the antiquity of text F is confirmed by Philoponus. The omission in g can be reasonably explained by referring to the grammatical difficulty presented by text F (to which I shall now turn), and in any case cannot be regarded as a plausible option.

No reading is clearly *difficilior*, but from a linguistic point of view text F presents an evident problem, since it lacks a subject which is usually supplied by referring to δόγμα. This word, however, occurs some lines earlier and in a completely different syntactical context. One could also consider τὸ μὲν οὖν δὴ παρ' ἡμῶν, coordinated with ἄλλος δέ, as a circumlocution for ἡμεῖς; but the phrase is unnatural in Plato,⁸ and the presence of οὖν δὴ makes this option even less plausible.⁹ The syntax is much clearer if, on the contrary, we adopt text A, where θεός is the subject of μνύει.¹⁰ However, this is not enough to make us opt for θεός, and the philosophical analysis proves crucial.

In favour of text F, it is tempting to invoke the principle according to which Timaeus' εἰκὸς λόγος is intrinsically unstable and negotiable (presumably this is the reason why Burnet opted for this reading and translators maintained it): Timaeus would be conscious that he is providing *just* a reasonable (or, in this perspective, probable) account, so it is fair for him to leave room for other options (namely, the five-worlds hypothesis).¹¹ This is a dangerous line of reasoning, though. If it were correct, we would be forced to project the same sceptical perspective onto the preceding statement about the uniqueness of the world (30c–31b), which is directly based on the Demiurge's goodness and the nature of the intelligible living being—that is, on intelligible objects, which are neither grasped through perception nor judged by belief. On the contrary, the argument at 30c–31b can be regarded as a strong foundation, since—as noted above—it involves assumptions related to the Demiurge's action and the causal role of the

⁶ M. Dragonetti, 'La traduzione armena del *Timeo* platonico e la tradizione del testo greco', *Rendiconti dell'Istituto Lombardo. Accademia di Scienze e Lettere. Classe di Lettere e Scienze Morali e Storiche* 122 (1988), 49–84.

⁷ Dragonetti (n. 6), 72–3. However, my analysis here is cautious. Since C is a primary witness, it may have preserved θεός independently. Moreover, the Armenian translation sometimes has errors found in text F; hence it might be regarded as providing stronger evidence than a mere confirmation of text A.

⁸ A subject is explicitly added in similar constructions: e.g. *Euthphr.* 15a8, *Phlb.* 11b6, *Leg.* 817c1, 861b6. The only parallel to which one can appeal is *Ti.* 48c2, where, however, τό γε παρ' ἡμῶν (remarkably *following* οὖν) cannot really be reduced to ἡμεῖς and rather indicates the state of things in relation to 'us'. I translate text A accordingly.

⁹ The solution was proposed by L. Brisson, *Platon: Timée–Critias* (Paris, 1992), 254 n. 423, who, however, recognizes the difficulty of text F. As to the impossibility of deciding which text is correct on a linguistic basis, it is enough to mention that A.E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* (Oxford, 1928), 379 stated that Burnet's is 'the obviously correct text', while U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Platon* (Berlin, 1919), 2.392 considered it absurd.

¹⁰ One might object that text A would inappropriately contrast God with a mortal (ἄλλος δέ). This is not the case, however, since in my reading the contrast (as we shall soon see) is between two reasonable accounts, one of which is based on the witness of God.

¹¹ The fact that Timaeus is still committed to his own account is not decisive; text F anyway implies that in principle someone else can provide an equally reliable reasonable account moving from different premisses.

paradigm which could hardly be regarded as weak from a Platonic point of view. Moreover, recent discussions of the notion of εἰκὼς λόγος have modified the standard view of the epistemic value of Timaeus' εἰκὼς λόγος, emphasizing that it might also be regarded as an account aiming to approximate to the Demiurge's practical reasoning.¹²

All this makes a different solution desirable, and the solid attestation of text A makes it more than appropriate to consider what Plato would say if this were the correct reading. Text A states that the thesis of the uniqueness of the world is based on what the Demiurge reveals and on the nature of the world itself. The only way that the Demiurge can reveal the world's natural uniqueness is by spelling out the metaphysical reason why the world is such. As we have seen, this is exactly what Timaeus has done at 30c–31b: the uniqueness of the world depends on its being by nature an image of a paradigm, and this in turn is ensured by the Demiurge's goodness. Hence text A would repeat the argument presented at 30c–31b; this is an advantage from one point of view, in that it solves an apparent inconsistency in the composition of Timaeus' account. On the other hand, we might wonder why Timaeus would simply rephrase the argument of 30c–31b, and in particular why he should hint that someone may have different views.

My answer to both questions is that in this way Timaeus is (paradoxically) stressing the non-negotiability of the correct conclusion, which is stronger than any other reasonable account. Let us first focus on the difference between the unreasonable hypothesis of uncountable worlds and the (allegedly) reasonable hypothesis of five worlds. The former is ascribed to people who have no experience of such discourses and is ruled out without any discussion, while the latter is said to be reasonable and plausible as a belief deriving from a different point of view from Timaeus'. The standard interpretation of the origin and logic of the five-world hypothesis is still persuasive: the reason why here—and here alone—five worlds are possible (or, at least, are said to be conceivable) is that now the reader's attention is drawn to the cosmological role of five regular solids.¹³ Hence the difference between these two hypotheses is that the former is simply devoid of any mathematical grounds—from Plato's point of view, at least¹⁴—while the latter can rely on a specific logic, that of the importance of mathematical structures in the physical world. Within certain limits, this is indeed a logic which Timaeus endorses. However, while it may lead to the development of some consistent beliefs, it cannot be used as the only parameter for a cosmogony, which can be consistently construed only if the stable mathematical reasoning underlying it in turn depends on even more stable and valuable premises, namely, the Demiurge's goodness and reasoning and the intelligible model. It is in this sense that we can say that the five-world hypothesis is reasonable, yet epistemologically inferior to that of a single

¹² See M. Burnyeat, 'ΕΙΚΩΣ ΜΥΘΟΣ', *Rhizai* 2 (2005), 143–65, but also G. Betegh, 'What makes a myth *eikōs*?', in R. Mohr and B. Sattler (edd.), *One Book, the Whole Universe: Plato's Timaeus Today* (Las Vegas, 2010), 213–24 and S. Broadie, *Nature and Divinity in Plato's Timaeus* (Cambridge, 2012), 31–60. I provide my general interpretation of this issue in F.M. Petrucci, 'A living reasonable account: on the status of *Timaeus'* *eikōs logos* (again)', forthcoming in *JHS* 143 (2023).

¹³ For the traditional and still authoritative interpretation of the passage, see Cornford (n. 2), 220–1; for a recent and intriguing (though somewhat speculative) reading, see M. Rashed, 'Plato's five worlds hypothesis (*Tim.* 55cd): mathematics and universals', in R. Chiaradonna and G. Galluzzo (edd.), *Universals in Ancient Philosophy* (Pisa, 2013), 87–112.

¹⁴ It is likely that Plato here has a polemical target in mind, namely, Democritus: P.-M. Morel, 'Timée, Démocrite, et la nécessité', in A. Brancacci and M. Dixsaut (edd.), *Platon, source des Présocratiques. Exploration* (Paris, 2002), 129–50, at 138–9.

world: an abstract consideration of physics might lead to the five-world hypothesis, but since the number of the elements and their appropriate geometrical structures are established by the Demiurge, the Demiurge's very reasoning is ontologically and axiologically prior to any account based solely on geometrical physics.

One wonders whether this—that is, requiring confirmation from God—may not be too much for Plato. However, at 72d4–9 we are presented with a similar scenario. After his description of the tripartition of the soul and the related connection of the 'parts' of the soul to different organs, Timaeus explicitly states that the only criterion allowing us to be certain of the truth of his conclusion would be God's approval (τὸ μὲν ἀληθὲς ὡς εἴρηται, θεοῦ συμφήσαντος τότε ἂν οὕτως μόνως δισχυρίζοιμεθα). In this case, however, such approval cannot be received, and Timaeus limits himself to relying on his reasonable account. However, the reason why one cannot have God's approval is related to the specific issue which Timaeus is dealing with here. Indeed, the generation of mortal living beings is not produced directly by the Demiurge but by the lower Gods, who are called to imitate the Demiurge's reasoning and action, though dealing with much more unstable objects (41a7–43a6). In other words, the Demiurge cannot give his confirmation here since he is not the divinity who produced human beings¹⁵—and, more generally, since the objects at stake (that is, individual living beings) have a lower ontological status than the world itself. This, though, does not apply to the generation of the world, which is directly accomplished by the Demiurge, whose reasoning has been clearly and fully unravelled at 30c–31b: briefly, God has already confirmed the metaphysical reasons why there is just one perfect world.¹⁶

Hence text A is not only (at least) as well attested as text F philologically and more suitable syntactically but also much more effective philosophically. Keeping text A generates a significant philosophical pay-off: not only does Timaeus' account of the uniqueness of the world become much more consistent, but it also confirms that his reasonable account (and, hence, Plato's cosmology) in any case relies on strong metaphysical premisses, which limit the instability of our grasp on the sensible world as far as possible and make Timaeus' account stronger than (or at least not inferior to) any other reasonable account (29c7–d3).

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¹⁵ Even assuming that the Demiurge keeps 'monitoring' the lower gods' activity, he is no longer directly involved in the generation of mortal living beings (41a7–d3, 42e5–6).

¹⁶ μὲν often refers to someone declaring something *expressly*, but it is not necessary to take this aspect literally. If Timaeus' reasonable account aims to approximate to the Demiurge's reasoning (page 4 above), what Timaeus has said at 30c–31b reproduces the argument which the Demiurge *would give* in favour of the uniqueness of the world, if he were asked to point it out expressly.