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Epistemerastes. The Platonic Philosopher in the Timaeus between True Opinion and Science

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse the ways in which the nature of true philosophers is described in Plato's Timaeus. By examining the distinction between two kinds of opinion – one (produced by sensation) absolutely false, the other (developed through one of the soul's rational faculties) reliably true – I will try to show that Plato coined a new term to denote both true philosophers

and the characteristics of their knowledge. From being a ‘love of wisdom’, true philosophy came to be defined as a ‘passion for science’. Finally, I will try to illustrate the protreptic intent underlying this choice of words and how it concerns the main critical target of the *Timaeus*, the so-called Presocratics.

Keywords: *Plato, Timaeus, Epistemology, Philosophy of Nature.*

1. Philosophers in the *Timaeus*: True Opinion and Science

One of Plato’s main concerns is certainly to define the nature of true philosophers. Socrates’ death sentence proved that the majority of Athenians were sceptical about – or, even worse, blatantly hostile towards – philosophers’ value and usefulness: hence the need to rehabilitate their reputation. At the same time, Plato needed to defend and promote his thought against many ‘opponents’: these were intellectuals who either claimed to be perfect philosophers or were erroneously regarded as very wise. In Plato’s eyes, the spread of their alleged knowledge was dangerous, because it could both compromise other citizens’ education and invalidate the authority that true (i.e., Platonic) philosophy should assert: hence the need to define the very few proper philosophers.¹ In the *Sophist*, Plato promised a trilogy focused on the characteristics of sophists, politicians, and philosophers (*Sph.* 216b8-217b3): he fulfilled this promise only partially, by writing the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, since he never composed a dialogue entitled the *Philosopher*. However, a

¹ The *Apology* and the first dialogues may be primarily aimed at defending Socrates and thus philosophy by highlighting the intellectual and moral inadequacies of their detractors and of other – alleged – sages. In other and later dialogues it is possible to identify explicit or veiled delegitimizations of the Sophists, Isocrates, Antisthenes, but also Homer, Hesiod, Euripides, and the so-called Presocratics.

description of the nature of true philosophers can be found in numerous dialogues and may be seen to account for this omission.²

Since the same attributes emerge, for example, from the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*, the *Symposium*, and the *Theaetetus*, the character of true philosophers described in these dialogues may reasonably be taken to correspond to the hypothetical content of the unwritten *Philosopher*; in other words, the image depicted in these dialogues represents the keystone of Plato's conception of the nature of true philosophers. These are individuals who have mastered the science of ideas by detaching themselves from the corporeal sphere (namely, sensation and bodily desires) and focusing only on their souls (*Phd.* 63e8-68b7; *R.* 475b8-480a13; 514b8-517c4; *Smp.* 208e5-209a5; *Tht.* 173e5-176b3); they have acquired a divine status and, as such, have established a deep connection with the gods, i.e. with the ideas (*R.* 500d1; *Smp.* 203a5; *Tht.* 176b1);³ they possess virtues, and thus their "way of life" (*bios*) is the best (*Phd.* 68b8-69e5; *R.* 485e3-487a5; *Smp.* 209a3-4; *Tht.* 176b2-3);⁴ finally, their wisdom offers the proper means to govern cities or, at least, to suggest the ways in which other citizens should behave (*R.* 484e7-d2; 519a1-521b11; *Smp.* 209a6-7; *Tht.* 175b9-176a2). In my opinion, in the *Timaeus* Plato sums up most of the philosophers' characteristics that he has illustrated elsewhere, in order to offer a more precise definition.

The starting point of my analysis is also the starting point of *Timaeus*' inquiry: first, the ontological distinction between the noetic

² As per Gill, 2016, p. 33-45, Plato promised the trilogy *Timaeus-Critias-Hermocrates* without actually writing the *Hermocrates* so that others could do so. The case of the missing *Philosopher* could be similar: Plato's disciples (as well as the readers of the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*) were asked to solve directly the issues regarding true philosophers' qualities, their superior way of life, and the kind of knowledge they possess, somehow following Plato's footsteps and hints through the dialogues.

³ On Plato's divine world and gods as metaphors, respectively, for the noetic sphere and the ideas, see Fink, 2007, p. 245-246. On the divine nature of the ideas, see e.g. *Phd.* 80b1, 84a9; *R.* 500c9-d1, 517d4-5; *Phdr.* 246d8-e1.

⁴ Direct translations from the Greek are marked by "" and are mine, unless otherwise stated.

world, “that which always is, without generation” (*Ti.* 27d6), and the sensible domain, “that which constantly becomes, and never is” (27d6-28a1);⁵ then, the resulting epistemological distinction between the cognitive faculties by which humans can examine these levels; finally, the two different kinds of discourse that give a detailed account either of the intelligible sphere or of the material one (27d5-29d3). As is well known, in Plato’s thought the traits of stability, uniformity, and lack of change manifestly show what is perfect and what is flawed, in any kind of investigation, be it ontological, epistemological, ethical, political, or cosmological. Consequently, not only the two ontological levels, but also the two cognitive faculties introduced by Timaeus should be regarded as, respectively, superior and inferior. On the one hand, we have “thought” (*noesis* – 28a1), which is able to recognize and to rationally explain that which always is, because this sphere is stable and constantly identical to itself: as a result, this faculty offers coherent and fully valid knowledge by focusing only on the ideas. On the other hand, we have “opinion” (*doxa* – 28a2), which is based on the kind of “sensation that is impossible to express rationally” (28a2-3): it provides inadequate and invariably uncertain knowledge, both because its object of inquiry is that which always changes and – as Timaeus will show later – because this kind of opinion originates from the five senses alone, which are fallacious since they are part of the material domain. The two types of “discourse” (*logos*) produced either by thought or by sensible opinion, and addressed either to that which always is or to that which is subject to generation, are distinguished into a totally true and irrefutable *logos* and a “likely” one (*eikos* – 29c2), based on a precise principle: each discourse is somehow akin (29b5) to the qualities of the object under examination. As such, the *logos* that concerns the noetic sphere acquires its perpetual validity and rationality, while the *logos* that illustrates the world of becoming inherits its mutability and thus its lack of reliability.

⁵ As regards this partition I am following Robinson, 1979, p. 105-109.

Timaeus identifies that which always is with the intelligible domain and that which always becomes with the sensible world by noting that the cosmos has been generated: it is corporeal because it is visible and tangible and, as such, can be known through the senses, which clearly show that the cosmos undergoes perpetual transformation and is thus subject to generation (28b2-c2). In order to subsist, the cosmos needs a “cause” (*aitia*): namely, the ideas, “that which always is, without generation”, the object of inquiry of rational thought.⁶ Through the figure of the Demiurge – probably a metaphor for the causal and paradigmatic activity of the noetic sphere – the cosmos is produced as an imitation of the perfection of the ideas: as such, it is beautiful and complete, even though it is a generated entity and, as such, inferior to the qualities of the intelligible world (28a4-b2; 28c3-29a6; 29d7-30c1).⁷ From the ideas the cosmos derives beauty (30d2), harmony (32c2), self-sufficiency (33d2), intelligence (34a2), eternity, and regularity (37d1-39e2).

The study of the cosmos through the *doxa* that acts with sensation unveils exclusively its sensible aspect – i.e. its materiality – in accordance with the brief explanation provided in *Ti.* 28b7-c2 regarding the fact that the cosmos has been generated. However, as I have just noted, throughout the dialogue the cosmos is analysed above all as something dependent on the noetic world: within itself, it preserves a sort of ‘noetic pattern’ that arranges its characteristics in the best possible way for a generated entity. Timaeus does not focus on the cosmos in its most imperfect and changing aspects (i.e., merely as a visible and tangible being): above all, he illustrates the characteristics of phenomena that reveal the presence of the ideas as their “model” (28e6); their superior qualities that cannot absolutely

⁶ As per Fronterotta, 2014, p. 95-120, the principles of phenomena are undoubtedly the ideas (the superior causes) and necessity (albeit not perfect as the ideas, necessity is eternal and can thus be considered a proper cause); however, the cosmic soul could be conceived as another principle in a sort of ‘imperfect dualism’.

⁷ See Ferrari, 2003, p. 83-96. The figure of the Demiurge shows that everything has been generated as beautiful and perfect, since craftsmen usually aim to produce excellent works (*Ti.* 28a6-b1), as suggested by Johansen, 2014, p. 297-320.

depend on the material sphere; and the intelligent design to which they conform. Therefore, Timaeus's discourse is not an expression of the opinion that relies on the senses alone. Indeed, if he had based his speech only on this kind of *doxa*, he would have not been able to show the involvement of the ideas in the genesis of the cosmos: he would have described the sensible world exclusively as a set of interactions between the four elements, which is to say between generated phenomena. Consequently, it is necessary to presuppose the intervention of another cognitive faculty, intermediate between purely rational thought (which is always true and whose objects of inquiry are the ideas 'in themselves', as they exist within the intelligible domain) and the opinion that hinges on the senses (which concerns only the perception of the sensible world, providing irrational and inadequate knowledge). In order to identify this intermediate faculty, it is necessary to consider the characteristics of the knowing subject: the soul.

The very first "project" (30c1) of the Demiurge was to craft a cosmos both living and endowed with thought: for this reason, he decided to generate its "soul" (*psyche*), which is the principle both of life and of knowledge (30b1-c1). These faculties depend on the soul's constant motion, which is the cause of life but also the means by which the *psyche* can know things.⁸ The cosmic soul was produced from three kinds – being, sameness, difference – according to specific mathematical relations. It was then joined to the body of the cosmos and acquired two concentric and moving circles: the innermost one represents the movement of the different; the outermost one is instead the movement of the identical, which the Demiurge set as the best and supreme (34b3-37a2). These two types of motion allow the cosmic soul to know the two ontological levels illustrated by Timaeus at the beginning of the dialogue: when the *psyche* comes in contact with that which is "indivisible" (37a5-6) – with the ideas, with that which always is – it is able to recognize each idea as being both identical to and different from itself and other ideas; when the soul

⁸ For the connection between movement and production of knowledge see Pender, 2000, p. 75-107.

comes in contact with that which is “divisible” (37a6) – with phenomena, with that which constantly becomes – it is able not only to conceive of each phenomenon as being identical to and different from itself and other phenomena, but also to distinguish the relationships, the place, the modalities, and the time to which phenomena are subject, in relation to either other phenomena or the ideas (37a2-b3).⁹

In my opinion, Timaeus is distinguishing three kinds of knowledge, each with its own object of investigation: a study of the noetic domain in itself; an inquiry regarding the sensible sphere in itself, i.e. in the terms of the relationships that exist exclusively between phenomena; an analysis of the two worlds as connected with each other. Therefore, there is a twofold way of considering the cosmos: as a phenomenon in relation to the other phenomena of which it constitutes the whole; as an entity dependent on the perfection of the noetic model. In the first case, the cosmos is known by the opinion that is based on sensation. This is indeed the faculty that is exclusively interested in the sensible aspect of the cosmos and which is able to unveil only its phenomenal – and thus imperfect – characteristics: such knowledge is inadequate and irrational because it is not produced by thought and focuses exclusively on the constant mutability of the sensible world. In the second case, the cosmos is analysed in connection with the intelligible domain, which can be recognized through reason and thought. In both cases, the soul is the knowing subject. Therefore, there must be a particular type of opinion, which concerns the cosmos but also the eidetic pattern that orders it when the two interact: this opinion cannot rely only on the senses but must also involve a part of the soul’s rational sphere, namely its circular movements.¹⁰

⁹ Knowing means recognising the identity and the difference of a ‘substance’ and its predicates, as shown by Brisson, 1998, p. 340-352.

¹⁰ As regards sensation, it is not so much the cosmic soul as the individual ones that employ the five senses. On the mechanisms of sensation in relation to the soul’s activities, see Brisson, 1997, p. 149-184.

Timaeus describes how the movements of the *psyche* produce knowledge (37b3-c5). True reasoning, conducted “without the use of voice and sound”, is granted when the soul relies only on itself, on the self-moved (37b5-6): if it turns with its circle of the different to “that which can be perceived through sensation” (37b6), previously called that which is divisible, it will develop “firm and true opinions and beliefs” (*doxai kai pisteis [...] bebaioi kai aletheis* – 37b8); if it focuses on “that which can only be grasped through rationality” (37c1) – namely, that which is indivisible – with its circle of the identical, it will offer “thought and science” (*nous episteme te* – 37c2). In my opinion, in the first case Timaeus is illustrating a form of doxastic knowledge that arises without the exclusive contribution of the five senses. Indeed, he is considering the case in which the cosmic soul employs its rational faculties, its two movements (*en toi kinoumenoi* – 37b5): as such, pure sensation – as per Timaeus’ words, voice and sound – is not involved. I would argue that firm and true opinion is the soul’s cognitive faculty whose object of inquiry is the sensible world in its connections with the ideas: the *psyche* is thus capable of revealing the noetic pattern underlying phenomena, which is impossible to recognize through the senses alone. This faculty is termed opinion because it is interested primarily in the study of the cosmos, i.e. in that which always becomes, in accordance with the ontological and epistemological distinctions advanced at the beginning of the dialogue. Consequently, it cannot be named science, which investigates only the noetic domain in itself. It is considered true, on the one hand, because it does not employ the fallacious senses alone but also, and above all, a part of the soul’s rational sphere (the circle of the different); on the other hand, because it shows the presence of the ideas (their traces in the sensible world, not their state within the intelligible domain), which are always synonymous with truth.¹¹

¹¹ Anderson, 2010, p. 247-260, suggests that the expression ‘true discourse’ shows that the solution of a certain issue is correct – and also approved by Plato himself – because the inquiry has been conducted by relying on the knowledge of ideas: this is certainly the case of the *Republic*, but of any other dialogue as well. In *Ti*.

In summary, I hold that *doxa alethes* is the third cognitive faculty whose existence I have previously assumed: it stands halfway between sensible and irrational opinion and thought and science. *Doxa alethes* and thought/*episteme* are introduced when Timaeus considers the case of the cosmic soul, the most rational and perfect entity in the sensible domain: the kind of opinion that is based on sensation is described by Timaeus when he focuses on individual souls. The single *psychai* produce inadequate knowledge when they turn to the sensible world with the five senses; but if they employ their rational sphere, they can also recognize the eidetic pattern of phenomena and attain the science of ideas, since individual souls are ‘related’ to the cosmic one and, as such, share its faculties.¹²

51d3-52d1, Timaeus apparently renounces the validity of *doxa alethes* because he later defines it as *alogos*: I would argue that he is now describing primarily the opinion produced by the senses alone, even though he is using the term true opinion, since he is pointing out how the body is involved in its production. In *this* passage *alone*, describing true opinion as “irrational” allows Timaeus both to separate the three ontological levels of ideas, phenomena, and necessity (just introduced in the discussion) with greater clarity and to properly illustrate the differences between the three cognitive faculties that examine these levels. In such a way, Timaeus reaches four outcomes: first of all, he is able to praise the constant validity of thought against opinion and “bastard reasoning” (see below, n. 18); secondly, he shows how describing necessity in itself is difficult in comparison to studying ideas and phenomena, since it is an eternal principle (and in this regard akin to the ideas and thus object of a *logismos*) but devoid of characterizations; thirdly, he reduces the degree of certainty of the kind of knowledge that investigates phenomena against the superiority of *nous*; finally, he prevents ‘bastard *logismos*’ and ‘*alethes* opinion’ from being confused, based on the fact that their names are somewhat similar to the ‘*logos* that is always *alethes*’ produced by thought. Elsewhere, Timaeus focuses more on the internal distinction between the kind of opinion offered by the senses alone and that produced by the soul’s circle of the different.

¹² My hypothesis regarding the existence of two kinds of opinion in the *Timaeus* does not contrast with other dialogues: for example, in the *Sophist* and in the *Theaetetus* Plato distinguishes an opinion that relies only on sensation, which produces imperfect knowledge, and a true opinion that partly involves thought, which offers more accurate information, as shown, for example, by Grönross, 2013, p. 1-19. The expression true opinion recurs – perhaps for the first time – in the *Meno*, and is related to ethical and epistemological issues: opinion becomes science if it is integrated with demonstrations, i.e. with an explanation of the reason why someone possesses knowledge (as opposed to merely claiming to possess it). True

In order to generate individual souls, the Demiurge employed the same elements with which he had shaped the cosmic soul; the production of single bodies and their union with their respective *psychai* are instead assigned to other figures, the lesser gods. The very first interweaving between a soul and a “body” (*soma*) causes the first numerous “affections” (43b7): the body comes in contact with the material elements of which all other phenomena are composed and enables them to reach the soul, thus preventing the *psyche* from using its movements properly. Over time, the soul’s circles regain their regularity and recover their cognitive functions (41c6-44b7). This description does not refer to a specific moment in which the soul was first disturbed by sensation, never to be perturbed again: on the contrary, Timaeus is showing the primordial genesis of individual souls and their union with a body in order to describe both their present condition (*nyn kat’archas te* – 44a8) and their purpose. The soul’s movements are *constantly* hindered by those produced by the five senses: if the individual *psyche* relies solely on sight, hearing, and so on, it will never be able to produce valid knowledge. Within individual souls, the movements of sensation collide with the circles of the identical and the different, so that the rotation of the former is totally restrained and the revolution of the latter is obstructed (43d2-4). On the one hand, the senses completely prevent the soul from developing knowledge of ideas, because they block its circle of the identical. On the other hand, they both ‘divert’ the soul’s attention towards the sensible and bodily dimension and force it to focus only on the inferior qualities of the cosmos, namely its constant change and mutation: indeed, sensation hampers the soul’s circle of the different, which offers an adequate comprehension of the sensible world, i.e. of its noetic pattern. If individual souls manage to limit

opinion is also discussed in the *Theaetetus*: the soul develops science by pondering objects – even sensible ones – perceived by the soul; true opinion is ambiguous, since it relies on the senses but also on the soul’s rational activities. On all these issues see Lafrance, 1981, p. 83-115, 197-304, who examines the characteristics of true opinion in the dialogues without considering the case of the *Timaeus*. See also the collection of essays by Trabattoni, 2016.

and then to eliminate the influence of sensation, they will produce perfect wisdom.¹³

Within the *soma*, the rational part of the soul resides in the head, whose spherical shape is best suited to contain the two circular motions and whose position, at the apex of the body, constantly reminds us of the need to put rationality in control of human life (44d3-8). The head includes the eyes, which are the best means to satisfy all the soul's needs (45a6-b4). More specifically, the eyes provide one of the most reliable ways in which souls can stem material drives and desires: they allow the contemplation of the cosmos, of everything beautiful and perfect, namely the stars, the sun, and the sky. By observing the regularity of these phenomena, humans have been able to infer the notions of number and time and any other element required in order to exercise philosophy: as such, philosophy is defined as the contemplation of the order of the sensible world (47a1-b5). By recognizing the regular motions of the cosmos, humans can realize that they share the same kind of movements within their souls, even though they are susceptible to perturbation by sensible impulses; hence, they can understand their fundamental duty: to focus only on their rational parts, which offer perfect and coherent knowledge and whose object of inquiry is the ideas in themselves, within the pure noetic world. The outcome is both the elimination of any disturbance that may arise from the body and complete assimilation to the superior and stable movements of the cosmic soul (47b5-c6).¹⁴

¹³ Thought is a faculty that belongs both to the cosmic soul and to individual ones and, as such, does not need the body in order to function properly. However, intelligence is usually embodied and must make great efforts – especially in the case of individual souls – to overcome the impediments of the sensible and corporeal domain in which it is relegated, as pointed out by Carpenter, 2008, p. 39-57.

¹⁴ I do not mean that the study of phenomena must be avoided completely, since sensation is teleologically oriented and can be directed towards higher forms of knowledge (the real reason why humans possess eyes is indeed to recognize the perfection of the cosmos that comes from its intelligible model): simply,

The eyes provide a purely sensible form of knowledge, based on the perception of the cosmos; by exercising philosophy, humans recognize an order underlying the phenomena that sight has revealed (especially in the celestial part of the cosmos, superior to the sublunar world). The aim of this activity is to guarantee the full rotation to the soul's movements and, consequently, to produce two corresponding forms of knowledge: true opinion thanks to the circle of the different, and science thanks to the circle of the identical. According to the definition provided in the *Timaeus*, philosophy coincides with the analysis of the sensible world in its connections with the noetic one. The contemplation of the inherent order of the cosmos somehow lights a spark, which inflames individuals and forces them to trace a similar regularity within themselves, within their souls' motions, which they must follow and support. More specifically, individuals must abandon all interest in the material world, in favour of the rational, divine, and immortal sphere of the *psyche*. The development of science – the study of the pure noetic domain – is a different and further step compared to this kind of philosophy: *episteme* represents higher, perfect, and infallible knowledge, because it considers the ideas in themselves and in relation only to other ideas. In other words, the analysis of the sensible world in relation to the ideas (the exercise of philosophy) paves the way for the study of the noetic world in itself (the exercise of science).¹⁵

I suggest that, owing to this particular definition of philosophy, *Timaeus* makes a further distinction: on the one hand, those who love philosophy and produce discourses regarding the nature of the cosmos exactly like *Timaeus' logos*; on the other hand, those who love science and have travelled the whole path of philosophy, reaching the last and highest step, i.e. the cultivation of the soul's

individuals must not rely on the senses alone but also – and above all – on thought, as pointed out by Johansen, 2008, p. 160-176.

¹⁵ In outlining this distinction between science, true opinion, and false opinion, I am developing the analyses of the cognitive affinity between the cosmic and human *psychai* put forward by Betegh, 2018, p. 120-140: true opinion is produced when human souls turn to the phenomenal world not through sensation alone, but through their circle of the different, in the same way as the cosmic soul does.

rational dimension alone and the consequent development of the kind of knowledge that is produced when the circle of the identical turns to that which always is. “Those who love thought and science” (*ho nou kai epistemes erastes* – 46d7-8) investigate the true causes of phenomena, the noetic world (46d7-e6). Plato is introducing a more ‘technical’ and precise definition for the individuals who devote their life to the full and superior exercise of intellectual activities. The word *philosophia* seems to refer both to a weaker will and a more generic form of knowledge, “interest” (*philia*) in “wisdom” (*sophia*): *philia* concerns the intention to study the sensible domain; in accordance with the interpretation hitherto suggested, *sophia* coincides with the production of *doxa alethes*, namely the unveiling of the noetic pattern behind phenomena. Philosophy stands in contrast to the ultimate and perfect form of knowledge, the “science” (*episteme*) of the pure noetic world, which arouses “passion” (*eros*): I would argue that Plato is coining a new term to identify the true and perfect philosopher – the Platonist – who is not a simple *philosophos*, but rather an *epistemerastes*.¹⁶

A Platonic philosopher, the *epistemerastes*, is an individual who, starting from the simple sensible contemplation of the stars and of other regular phenomena, has recognized the noetic order within the cosmos and has exercised *philosophia* in its ‘weakest’ form – the study of the ideas in relation to phenomena – thus producing true

¹⁶ In the *Republic*, Plato shows how the term *philosophos* became ‘inflated’ in his times: individuals who actually had nothing to do with philosophy – i.e., with Platonic philosophy – were commonly called philosophers. Therefore, Plato carefully examines the character of true philosophers in order to delegitimize any other alleged sage who is not a Platonist (*R.* 475d1-500d3). By introducing the *epistemerastes* of the *Timaeus*, Plato definitively proves that perfect knowledge exclusively consists in his science of ideas, and not in the false wisdom of his ‘competitors’ and rivals. The Greek word *philosophia* is usually translated as “love of wisdom”: in my opinion, the expression *eros* of *episteme* emphasizes the impulse felt by individuals who have devoted their lives to the intelligible world, in opposition to the weaker *philia* towards various and generic kinds of knowledge, including the one that considers the sensible world. For this reason, I suggest that translating *philia* as “interest” better reflects Plato’s intentions in the passage hitherto examined.

opinions; these philosophers, then, completely detach themselves from this particular version of the study of the sensible world and acquire the science of ideas, knowledge of the noetic world in all its purity, without considering their connections with the sensible cosmos; finally, they assimilate themselves to the perfect and divine characteristics of the cosmic soul. Consequently, the entire content of the *Timaeus* coincides with *doxa alethes*, since its aim is to reveal the noetic pattern underlying phenomena and not to discuss the ideas in the intelligible domain. As I have tried to show, *Timaeus* introduces his discourse as a likely one, but – I would add – with a specific nuance: it deals with the sensible world, and as such cannot be considered as stable and perfect as those discourses that describe only the nature of the ideas; yet, it is not entirely false either, because it partly considers the noetic sphere, albeit in its relations to phenomena.¹⁷ The particular nuance concerns the fact that *Timaeus'* *logos* is the *definitive* likely discourse regarding the nature of the sensible world (29c4-d3; 48b3-c2): the other likely *logoi* – i.e., the other discourses concerning phenomena – do not deserve the same qualification, because they are somehow ‘guilty’ of not revealing the order of the cosmos deriving from its dependence on the intelligible domain.¹⁸

The *Timaeus* could be interpreted as a revision of a typical Presocratic treatise *On nature*:¹⁹ however, it is an evolution and an improvement because, unlike the so-called naturalists, Plato shows the role of the ideas in the genesis of the cosmos by considering the sensible world in relation to its noetic model. According to the point of view of the *Timaeus*, the Presocratics have limited to the explanation of phenomena to their connection to other phenomena.

¹⁷ On the expression *eikos logos* see Brisson, 2012, p. 369-391.

¹⁸ *Timaeus* also mentions another kind of discourse, the “bastard reasoning” (*logismos nothos* – *Ti.* 52b2) which concerns the *chora*, necessity: it is defined as a *logos* because it focuses on an eternal principle, necessity; it is called bastard because it has no other contents apart from recognizing the existence of necessity, since *chora* does not possess qualities and determinations. On this, see Miller, Göttingen 2003, p. 201-206, 231-220.

¹⁹ As suggested by Naddaf, 1997, p. 27-36.

Following the terminology of the dialogue, their treatises *On nature* are an expression of the opinion that is based only on sensation: they can be considered likely discourses because their object of inquiry is that which always becomes; they cannot be considered definitive likely discourses because they employ the five senses alone as their main cognitive faculty, since they do not deal with the intelligible domain at all. On the contrary, the *Timaeus* is *the* discourse regarding the sensible world because it is developed on the basis of true opinion: the content of the dialogue represents the most exhaustive and perfect reconstruction of the cosmos because it has been conducted by the soul's rationality, and more precisely by its circle of the different. Indeed, in this way phenomena are studied adequately: their relation to their true causes, the ideas, are unveiled.

In the light of the ontological and epistemological distinction between the sensible world and the noetic domain, between true/false opinion and science, it is possible to understand Plato's critique of Anaxagoras – as a spokesman of the Presocratics – in the *Phaedo* (*Phd.* 96a6-99d3), which, in my opinion, foreshadows the entire content of the *Timaeus*. In his so-called autobiography, Socrates states that, at a young age, he was enthusiastic about the philosophy of nature: he read carefully Anaxagoras' book regarding the presence of an ordering “mind” (*nous*). However, Socrates was deeply disappointed when he realized that, instead of revealing an intelligent cause such as this *nous* could have been, Anaxagoras ended up tracing the explanation of everything back to the interactions between the four elements fire, air, water, and earth. According to Socrates, Anaxagoras mistakenly confused that which is a means (the four elements) with the true causes that employ this means to generate and operate. Anaxagoras – but every other Presocratic as well – did not recognize the existence of the true causes (the ideas); instead, he focused only on an ontological level that, according to the terminology of the *Timaeus*, can be considered at most the domain of *synaitiai*, of “contributing causes”, namely phenomena (*Phd.* 98b7-

c2; 99b2-4; *Ti.* 46c7).²⁰ This flaw is not only ‘theoretical’: the insufficiency of Presocratic philosophy also affects morality. If naturalists were to comment on Socrates’ last days, they would claim that he refused to escape from prison because his bones, muscles, and tendons had become so strained that he could only stay still, instead of stating that Socrates accepted his fate because he knew justice and goodness and wanted to respect them. The Presocratic treatises *On nature* are unable to show “what is best” (*hoti ameionon* – *Phd.* 97e2), i.e. how to guide human conduct: their method, which consists in explaining phenomena through other phenomena, makes them not only blind to the existence of true causes but also incapable of suggesting the best way of life, of making humans wise, just, good, and perfect. On the contrary, Plato’s philosophy both adequately explains everything by illustrating the true causes and, thanks to the science of ideas, illustrates the kind of individual morality that is most preferable: Plato’s philosophy is fruitful and valid both theoretically and ethically (99d5-102a2).²¹

In the *Timaeus* Plato resumes – albeit tacitly, without mentioning precise figures – both this kind of devaluation of Presocratic thought and the exaltation of his own philosophy: the dialogue contains a definitive likely discourse regarding phenomena because it does not explain the sensible world through other sensible things but describes the cosmos as an entity dependent on the intelligible model, thus paving the way for the exercising of another activity, the science of ideas. The study of the noetic world presupposes that individuals have renounced the material and corporeal sphere in favour of the

²⁰ As per Bastit, 2003, p. 23-42, the core of Plato’s philosophy is the search for *aitiai* and, consequently, the proper ways to explain things, as declared in the *Phaedo* and reappraised in the *Timaeus*. A detailed analysis of the differences between *aitiai* and *synaitiai* is offered by Casertano, 2003, p. 33-63: Platonists devote their lives to the study of true causes; the other – and inferior – philosophers to contributing causes.

²¹ The *Phaedo* is an introduction to, a defence of, and an attempt to promote Plato’s philosophy. As this is entrusted to Socrates’ autobiography, Platonic thought is not presented in a dogmatic and ‘authoritarian’ fashion, as suggested by Gower, 2008, p. 329-346.

development of their rational part, the divine and immortal soul: the ‘prize’ for a conduct devoted to philosophy and, above all, to *episteme* is the achievement of happiness, which is attained by leaving the cycle of reincarnations described in the dialogue. The souls of those who have devoted their life to science of ideas – and have consequently distanced themselves from sensation and bodily pleasures – reach the stars, the most rational and perfect generated beings, and enjoy eternal happiness alongside such gods, thus somehow ascending to godhood. On the other hand, those who have not developed the proper knowledge degrade their life through the various stages of reincarnation: individual souls will pass from men to women and then to animals (*Ti.* 90a2-92c3).

Therefore, Platonic philosophy both offers superior knowledge and shows the preferable way of life: for this very reason, it is also the only activity that ensures the acquisition of happiness, that of gods. In order to achieve such a perfect condition, it is necessary to master the highest form of knowledge, science, which requires a preliminary study of the cosmos, precisely the philosophy (of nature) of the *Timaeus*. This dialogue is superior to the Presocratic treatises *On nature* in the study of the sensible world because it is the result of true opinion, of the cognitive effort of the soul (through its circle of the different) when it contemplates that which always becomes: by unveiling the existence of the ideas, it also suggests what kind of individual morality is preferable, namely avoiding the bodily sphere.²² The reading of the *Timaeus*, then, should be integrated with a study of the ideas in themselves – exclusively as part of the noetic world – in order to reach intellectual and moral excellence.²³ The

²² Carone, 2005, p. 24-78, suggests that the proper morality consists in behaving rationally, above all by detaching oneself from corporeal and material impulses and desires. Therefore, the highest form of good life is to focus only on the divine (noetic) world and to assimilate oneself to its perfect characteristics (stability, self-sufficiency, and so on).

²³ I agree with Migliori, 2012, p. 121-181: in the case of the *Timaeus*, its notions should be implemented with those illustrated in the *Philebus*, as an example of how a dialectical inquiry provides a unique science that adequately explains not only

dialogue possesses a protreptic intent: its audience of intellectuals who usually deal with complex issues such as cosmological inquiries is strongly invited to devote their future life to the science of ideas, the highest and most difficult kind of knowledge, yet capable of rewarding humans with ultimate happiness.²⁴

2. Conclusions

In the light of my analyses, the portrayal of the *epistemerastes* in the *Timaeus* perfectly matches the description of true philosophers present in other dialogues: above all, the need for them to distance themselves from the sensible world by focusing on their souls, which is the only way to master the science of ideas and to ascend to the divine condition. Becoming scientists and developing this wisdom represents the preferable and final purpose at which the audience of the *Timaeus* must aim: this means that the audience in question is not yet endowed with the knowledge of the noetic world in all its purity. The *Timaeus* introduces the ideas by highlighting their relations to phenomena: as such, the dialogue suggests that, if its readers wish to become perfect individuals, they should devote their lives to an activity superior to philosophy/to the study of nature as the product of the ideas. As a result, *Timaeus* does not further specify that *episteme* offers the best political skills and that philosophers should take care of politics and the education of other people: it is first necessary to introduce the audience gradually to the fundamental assumptions of Platonic philosophy. In other words, unveiling both

the sensible world (thanks to the *Timaeus*) but also the noetic one (thanks to the *Philebus*).

²⁴ I follow Miller, 2003, p. 17-59: the audience of the *Timaeus* is encouraged to acquire knowledge of the intelligible world thanks to the notions discussed in the dialogue. Therefore, the *Timaeus* perfectly introduces the keystones of Platonic philosophy in order to focus on the science of ideas in the future: it is also for this reason, I would add, that the *Timaeus* presents references to theories advanced by Plato in other dialogues, as illustrated by Sedley, 2019, p. 45-72.

the existence of the ideas (as the true causes of phenomena) and the intimate nature of the cosmos (as generated from the noetic world) represents a much easier task than explaining extensively and immediately the contents of pure dialectic, i.e. of the study of the intelligible dimension in itself: the non-fully Platonic readers of the *Timaeus* are thus in a condition to progressively accept the need to focus on the ideas alone in the future, whose science compels its possessors to take part in political activities – following the keystones of Plato’s conception regarding the characteristics of true philosophy.

This interpretation offers a possible solution to a specific issue, namely why the philosopher-kings of the *Republic* are missing in the *Timaeus*, since at the beginning of the dialogue the *Republic* is partially summarized (*Ti.* 17a1-20c3). In my opinion, Timaeus’ discourse is set *before* the birth of philosopher-kings, who already possess the science of ideas and, therefore, the resulting practical-political skills. The *Timaeus* deals with philosophy: following the meaning assigned to this term in the dialogue, with the study of the order of the sensible world as produced by noetic causality. The *Timaeus* is not an expression of *episteme* but of *doxa alethes*, precisely because its object of examination regards first of all phenomena, that which always becomes. The need to partake in civic – political and educational – roles and the best means to govern cities are derived from the science of ideas, not from true opinion. Prompting the readers of the dialogue to devote their lives to *episteme* and so to political activities, namely to become philosopher-kings, is a much more complicated step in Plato’s educational project: as shown for example in *Republic* VII, the philosophers who have managed to master the science of ideas will refuse to return to the cave, to the city. The discourse of the *Timaeus* is not ‘self-contained’: it should be somehow integrated – assuming it succeeds in its intent of ‘conversion’ to *episteme*/to full Platonism – both with the actual

explanation of the ways in which science works and with the compulsion to engage in politics and education of other citizens.²⁵

Philosopher-kings are not depicted in the *Timaeus* owing to a ‘paideutic strategy’: the dialogue could be interpreted as part of an educational programme whose aim is to make its audience gradually develop the full potentialities of their superior nature. The readers of the *Timaeus* will become philosophers – knowers of the order of the sensible world as a realm dependent on the intelligible sphere – eager to acquire another kind of wisdom, *episteme*.²⁶ Their future full transformation into philosopher-kings, into individuals endowed with the science of ideas and the consequent practical-political skills, is an issue reserved either for other dialogues or for further discussions within the Academy.²⁷ This does not mean that there are no allusions to the civic role that true philosophers must play: indeed, the character of Timaeus combines both philosophy (but not yet the science of ideas) and politics, since he comes from Locris, in whose

²⁵ According to Schofield, 1999, p. 31-50, philosopher-kings are depicted in both the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*. In my opinion, the philosopher-kings are present only in the background of the dialogue: becoming such perfect individuals is the purpose to be fulfilled *after* reading the *Timaeus*, and more specifically once its audience have been persuaded to devote their life to the science of ideas (and hence to the kind of political activities that rely on science).

²⁶ As pointed out by Rossetti, 2006, p. 593-608, in the prologue of the dialogue Timaeus summarizes the fundamental notions of the *Republic* by somewhat ‘trivializing’ them, in order to remind the readers that they will not have to deal with a demanding and difficult dialogue, namely with a pure dialectic inquiry. Indeed – I would add – the *Timaeus* is set ‘before’ the acquisition of *episteme*. As such, the purported trivialization of the *Republic* is actually planned: the notions of the *Republic* summarized in the prologue can be discussed at length only once the readers of the *Timaeus* have been transformed into pure Platonic philosophers, into perfect scientists of ideas.

²⁷ I follow the analyses by Rowe, 1997, p. 51-57, reappraised in Rowe, 2004, p. 57-70: the *Timaeus* is not interested in defending and promoting the superiority of philosopher-kings directly. However, I do not fully endorse the suggestion that Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates are only politicians, and not philosophers. Socrates’ words actually show that Timaeus is not merely a politician (*Ti.* 19e8-20a5): the kind of philosophy that Timaeus exercises (the study of the cosmos as an entity generated from the intelligible model) is simply different from the wisdom of the philosopher-kings (the science of ideas).

government he had been involved (19e8-20a5). Timaeus' profile and interests – the study of phenomena in relation to the ideas but also a degree of political commitment (but not yet inside the *kallipolis*, the “perfect city” of the *Republic*) – plausibly represent the model to which the audience of the dialogue should *initially* aspire: as such, the political dimension must not be completely avoided, hence its brief mention in the *Timaeus*. Thanks to the ‘fiction’ of the dialogue – the ways in which the main characters are portrayed – Plato is foreshadowing another duty to which his not yet Platonist readers will have to devote their lives in the future if they wish to reach perfection: namely, becoming *epistemerastai*.

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