

Rethinking Plato's Theory of Art: Aesthetics and the *Timaeus*

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Introduction

The *Timaeus* presents a fascinating account of the cosmos. It includes a creation myth that introduces the figure known as the 'Demiurge', who, despite the fact that he is the cause of the sensible world, is reverently attributed with reason, and whose creation – the cosmos – is actually beautiful and good. In this dialogue Plato offers his readers a panorama of the universe. But just what are his intentions for this? Is his approach a precursor to the methods of natural science,¹ or does the *Timaeus* fall under the category of theology? This paper will discuss Plato's cosmological treatise and certain consequences that can be drawn, that is, how the methods used to analyse the origins and structure of the universe reveal a more existential attitude towards aesthetics.

In the *Timaeus* Plato explores the complexities of *mimesis* and entertains the possibility that imitation could actually exhibit ideal qualities. These considerations have repercussions for the status of the material world in Plato's cosmology, but they may also be extended to rethink his theory of art. I wish to analyse a number of salient themes in the *Timaeus* such as ontology, mythic symbols and the use of rhetoric. I will demonstrate how Plato's view towards these themes in the *Timaeus* can be extrapolated to reassess his aesthetics. My critical analysis will provoke the question – 'What evaluation of art would Plato have offered in accordance with the positions explicated in the *Timaeus*?'

Upon investigating a number of dialogues, searching specifically for references to art or representation, I realised that certain views I had thought to be exclusive to the *Timaeus*, or other late dialogues, also featured in works as early as the *Ion*. The more I continued to read in search of aesthetically relevant passages the more confident I became in holding the view that Plato never held a fixed metaphysical position at any one time that could be applied to every issue. I realised that any attempt to pin Plato down to one position in relation to a particular subject on the grounds of one dialogue was resisted by a revised presentation of that position when referring to the same topic elsewhere. In relation to art, Partee makes this observation: "Infinitely

¹ An alternative view is criticised by Catherine Osbourne, 'Space, Time, Shape, and Direction: Creative Discourse in the *Timaeus*', in, *Form and Argument in Late Plato*, eds Christopher Gill and Mary M. McCabe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 208.

responsive to nuances, Plato does not wish to formulate a tightly integrated philosophical system. He rejects false order even more forcefully than disorder and chaos”.²

This paper is a study of only one aspect of the vast ocean that is Platonic aesthetics: aesthetics in the *Timaeus*. The contradictions and nuances that surface in Plato’s analyses of aesthetic themes – which are directly or indirectly addressed in all of his dialogues – indicate his clear ambivalence towards art. Any final conclusion arrived at in relation to Platonic aesthetics runs the risk of failing to be exhaustive. To give a complete account of a Platonic theory of art one should avoid committing oneself entirely to one dialogue, and therefore explain only part of the story. By considering aesthetics within the *Timaeus*, I realise that I am only elucidating one aspect of Plato’s theory of art; more precisely I am addressing a diverse subject within the constraints of one particular text. By suggesting that we rethink Plato’s theory of art in relation to the *Timaeus* I mean that we should ask questions about how Plato would have felt about art upon considering the differing philosophical perspective of the *Timaeus*. Trying out various approaches in different dialogues, Plato enters into a dialogue with himself; and the tensions and variations in his own thinking illuminate many aspects of the aesthetics of poetry.³

The *Timaeus* and Metaphysics

The metaphysics of the *Timaeus* is a modification of the metaphysics presented in the *Republic*.⁴ In the *Timaeus*, Plato still maintains the two original

² Morriss H. Partee, *Plato’s Poetics* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1981), p. 7.

³ Elizabeth Asmis, ‘Plato on Poetic Creativity’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. R. Kraut (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 339.

⁴ Some more explanation must be given for why I have set the *Republic* and the *Timaeus* against each other as representatives of two different directions in Plato’s thought. I have chosen the *Republic* obviously because it contains a whole book devoted to the topic of art, though more importantly because many modern scholars insist on the centrality of the *Republic*. Scholars like Partee make strong statements in support of this view such as “The *Republic* provides the cornerstone for an evaluation of Plato’s most representative thought”. See Partee, *Plato’s Poetics*, p. 9.

The modern critical disposition towards the *Timaeus*, which has its origins in Aristotle’s physics and consequently views Plato’s ‘physics’ as secondary, neglects the fact that the text was the work of ancient philosophy that attracted the most commentary, and that most writers on the *Timaeus* agree that it contained Plato’s mature metaphysical views. The *Timaeus* was also the only dialogue studied seriously in the Medieval period and the famous Neoplatonist, Plotinus, makes over one hundred references to it in the *Enneads*. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. S. Mackenna (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), Appendix II, p. 553. It was crucial for formulating the views of Jewish and Christian theologians and was revered

categories featured in his dualist ontology. Aristotle makes the point in his *Metaphysics* (987a34-b1)⁵ that Plato never discarded his doctrine of separation between the realm of Forms and the realm of particulars and the *Timaeus* confirms this by restating the position through a parallel distinction between knowledge and opinion.⁶

We must in my opinion begin by distinguishing between that which always is and never becomes from that which is always becoming but never is. The one is apprehensible by intelligence with the aid of reasoning, being eternally the same, the other is the object of opinion and irrational sensation, coming to be and ceasing to be, but never fully real (27d-28a).⁷

The above quotation coincides with Plato's previous view explained in dialogues such as the *Republic* which explicate that since there are differing mental states, those of knowledge and opinion, then it necessarily follows that there are two different ontological categories that they refer to; the fundamental categories of being and becoming (477b-478b).⁸ But there are a number of important distinctions between Plato's metaphysical position in the *Republic*

as the most important dialogue of the Middle Platonic period. See J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 8. It became the guide for mysticism particularly amongst Gnostic thinkers and important even in the Sufi tradition. See P. Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 201-204. Even Aristotle refers to the *Timaeus* more than any other dialogue and believed it to be the source of Plato's mature views on physics, biology and cosmology. See William J. Prior, *Unity and Development in Plato's Metaphysics* (LaSalle IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1985), p. 173. On this evidence it may be safe to oppose some modern interpreters and state that the *Timaeus* is the cornerstone of Platonic thought. But my thesis will reveal that since Plato takes a different approach to different issues no one dialogue can be said to epitomise his final position; if he had a final position at all. For a brief explanation of the relationship between the *Timaeus* and Judeo-Christian cosmogony, and its influence on modern physics, refer to Hans Georg Gadamer, 'Idea and Reality in Plato's *Timaeus*', in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 158-159. For these reasons, and the fact that I feel that there is a distinction between the metaphysics of each text, I have used the two works as examples of varying Platonic views.

⁵ Aristotle, 'Metaphysics', *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁶ Aristotle's account of, what he understood to be, Plato's doctrine is expressed in the context of his criticism of it. The positive and negative responses to Aristotle's critique have substantiated much of Platonic scholarship, even though the validity of his scathing attack on the theory of ideas continues to be argued. See Gadamer, 'Idea and Reality in Plato's *Timaeus*', p. 156.

⁷ Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977). All future references will be made from this edition.

⁸ Gadamer, 'Idea and Reality in Plato's *Timaeus*', p. 161.

and his theory in the *Timaeus* that must be elucidated. The differences represented in the metaphysics of the *Timaeus* will be shown to be modifications of, or even challenges to, the basic premises stated to support the theory of art described in the *Republic*.

The *Timaeus* does not posit the Forms as causes in the theory of causation and when Plato claims that phenomena resemble Forms he no longer means that they share a common property, in other words the Forms are not self-predicative. This is an important point to consider since the theory of art in the *Republic* makes the point that the actual particular things resemble, participate in, share a common property with and are caused by their Forms. Plato uses the example of 'time' in the *Timaeus* to explain how Forms and phenomena relate. He shows how an eternal, unchanging, and paradigmatic concept can relate to a copy or image of it without sharing a common property. When detailing the activities of the creator he states:

... he determined to make a moving image of eternity, and so when he ordered the heavens he made in that which we call time an eternal moving image of the eternity which remains forever at one. (37c)

In this particular case, 'time', which is the image, is a replica of eternity, the paradigm. The phenomenon of 'time' does not manifest any quality that one may inductively attribute to eternity, even though eternity is the Form, or model, of 'time'. Therefore, we may say that the Form of bed cannot be described by, or attributed with, any quality whatsoever of the actual particular bed; the actual bed becomes a copy but remains unique because it physically exists. In any case, whatever connects the Form with the particular in their relationship together cannot be comprehended conceptually by finite human cognition; any understanding of the Forms is now only available through the limited example of phenomena.

To confirm his view that phenomena share no knowable characteristics with the Forms, Plato explains the false induction one may make when misrepresenting the relationship between the two;

For before the heavens came into being there were no days or nights or months or years, but he [the creator] devised and brought them into being at the same time that the heavens were put together; for they are all parts of time, just as past and future are also forms of it, which we wrongly attribute, without thinking, to the eternal Being (37d).⁹

⁹ Benitez argues that time does not apply to the Forms. Any time specification in respect to Forms is superfluous. Eugenio E. Benitez, *Forms in Plato's Philebus* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1989), p. 96.

The New View of the Phenomenal World

We now come to Plato's evaluation of the status or value of the phenomenal world. His theory of art in the *Republic* was dependent on the view that the material world was an inferior copy and that no real knowledge could be gained from the study of a particular thing. In fact, in other passages and dialogues one is advised to turn away from the physical world and deplore it. In these writings Plato acknowledges that the physical objects participate (metechein) in the Forms, which are the source of their essential characteristics; this being the necessary relationship that allowed one to know something. But since the theory of participation and the causal function of the Forms was reconsidered and modified in the *Timaeus*, so, too, was his view of phenomena. The status of the physical world is altered to compensate for the non-committal function of the Forms.

The world of appearance seems to have been elevated from its otherwise detested and worthless status to what Plato describes in the *Timaeus*, "by nature highest and best" (30c).¹⁰ The empirical world that was previously described as a realm of inferiority and decay in the previous dialogues has become, in the *Timaeus*, a world that is styled after and embodies eternal principles of order. The unit of the cosmos has now been elevated to a unique copy of a perfect and eternal model, a "loving being with soul and intelligence" (30b). For Plato, appearance is now structured on mathematics and rational knowledge – due to the method and virtues of the Demiurge – and is worthy of philosophical investigation.¹¹ A human's initial and most common form of empirical observation is through the sense of sight, and Plato, who had in some instances instructed us to avert from our sensual faculties and rely on reason alone, is here acknowledging the function of sight as the cause of knowledge.¹² In section 47 of the *Timaeus*, Timaeus himself is described as praising the senses by stating that they are "god's invention and gift" that aids the greatest gift: philosophy. This view of the senses is a radical change from that expressed particularly in the *Phaedo* as well as the *Republic*, and coincides with Plato's new position regarding the object of the senses.¹³

In the *Timaeus* Plato renders an account of the cosmos that gives one the impression that it is something with integrity and dignity: the impression one also has of the Forms. However, the cosmos remains an image in this

¹⁰ For an explicit example of Plato's repudiation of the physical world see Plato, 'Phaedo', in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 66-67.

¹¹ Prior, *Unity and Development in Plato's Metaphysics*, p. 93.

¹² Gadamer, 'Idea and Reality in Plato's *Timaeus*', p. 170.

¹³ Cornelia J. De Vogel, *Rethinking Plato and Platonism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), p. 174.

description, it is an image that is “so complete that every inquiry or claim directed to or dependent upon it, must be called verisimilar, [but] not false”.¹⁴ The method proposed by Plato for investigating the cosmos is probable or hypothetical.¹⁵ He maintains that every account of the cosmos can never be absolutely accurate, but is at best a likely story or *mythos*.¹⁶ Plato advises that one exercise a degree of scepticism towards any account that boasts certainty because all images that humans attempt to account for have subsequently been shaped by the conditions of the inquiring mind.

Introducing the Demiurge

In the *Timaeus* we also encounter a new element in the theory of causation. It is an important factor for reconsidering Plato’s theory of art because in the *Republic* art is the replica of something that is caused by the Forms and is described as being thrice removed from reality. In this particular view the Forms occupy a level of reality of which particular things only embody to a limited degree. In other words they are the imperfect products of the originals. The *Timaeus*, on the other hand, renders a mythological figure known as the Demiurge who is the initiator, “maker and father” of the universe (28c). The use of the Forms by the Demiurge in its causal process is explained in the following passage: “...therefore the maker of anything keeps his eye on the eternally unchanging and uses it as his pattern for the form and function of his product...” (28b). In the eyes of scientific rationalists and those who equate Plato’s cosmological intentions with those of Aristotle’s, the tale of the Demiurge is interpreted as nothing but an empty metaphor.¹⁷ However, Plato is not engaging in what we would believe today to be objective science, and is in

¹⁴ Anne Freire Ashbaugh, *Plato’s Theory of Explanation: A Study of the Cosmological Account of the Timaeus* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 2.

¹⁵ Aryeh Finkelberg, ‘Plato’s Method in the *Timaeus*’, *The American Journal of Philology*, vol. 117, no. 3 (1996), pp. 391-409.

¹⁶ Some scholars have affirmed that Plato’s myths constitute a defence of poetry in themselves, for example Christopher Janaway, *Images of Excellence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 159. Putting aside the fact that the creating of myths is an artistic activity itself, the fact that Plato used them, and attributes benefits to them, can be interpreted to be premises supporting an alternative aesthetic. Even though the force of the attack in book X of the *Republic* has convinced some commentators and readers of Plato’s antipathy towards art and poetry, most commentators are actually more drawn by the fact that Plato was himself a master poet and have sought to explain the ostensible contradiction; see Julius A. Elias, *Plato’s Defence of Poetry* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1984), p. 1. Plato’s concept and use of myth tends to be rather idiosyncratic. It cannot be conflated with what myth generally meant in his time, nor what it means in our own time; Elias, *Plato’s Defence of Poetry*, p. 208.

¹⁷ Gadamer, ‘Idea and Reality in Plato’s *Timaeus*’, p. 158.

fact combining conceptual analysis with symbolism with the intention of giving an account of the cosmos that offers a more dignified meaning with significance to individuals who must live in the cosmos. For this reason Plato does not address questions concerning the motives behind the production of the world. He simply states that by virtue of being “good” and non-possessive (knowing no *phthonos*), the Demiurge cannot stand to remain the only being worthy of the epithets “good” and “beautiful”.¹⁸ He desires that everything be like him as much as possible and therefore creates all things beautiful and good, and brings beings into existence that have Nous.¹⁹

Prior to participating in an act of creation a rational being, such as the Demiurge, must have a notion of what will evolve as a result of his effort. The thing that the Demiurge creates becomes precisely the object it envisioned. Therefore, the Demiurge is made the determining cause of becoming, insofar as he can foresee the end for the object. Whether the creation is good depends on the function of foresight. The beauty of the object, its constancy, is contingent upon the direction of the vision: “It can aim at that which ‘always is’ (the constant) as its paradigm, or at that which is formless and lacking in constancy”.²⁰ The ‘Beautiful’ is an absolute concept and therefore has constancy, and so that which becomes beautiful is brought about as a result of a prior reference to the Beautiful. The beauty ascribed by Plato to the cosmos confirms the divine focus of the Demiurge. In the context of art the implications of Plato’s reference to vision and its object become the basis of

¹⁸ It is interesting to note the similarities between the Demiurge and the Aristotelian teachings about the Supreme God expounded in the *Metaphysics* and the *De Anima*. The Demiurge is good and beautiful and therefore looks for the source of those qualities that he himself is. This is similar to the Aristotelian notion of a god that is self-directed in thought. Plato does not make this feature of the Demiurge explicit but evidence for interpreting the Demiurge as a self-directed god is found in Plotinus’s concept of the Nous. Armstrong makes the observation that the “transcendent self-sufficing God, pure and self-directed Act, the supreme object of desire, but himself desiring nothing but himself, appears in philosophy before Plotinus only in Aristotle”. A.H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), p. 3, and also see the *Enneads* VI. 8, 16. But upon considering the moral and altruistic attributes Plato ascribes to the Demiurge, and the fact that these qualities must eternally reside in him, one may deduce that like the Aristotelian god, the Demiurge is in some sense a self-thinking, or self-reflecting, mind. The point that distinguishes the Aristotelian god from the Platonic god is that the Demiurge is also self-willing and self-loving. (Armstrong also makes the point that a combination of the Aristotelian god and interpretations of the *Timaeus* were used to develop Plotinus’s concept of the Nous. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe*, p. 65.

¹⁹ Gadamer, ‘Idea and Reality in Plato’s *Timaeus*’, p. 163

²⁰ Gadamer, ‘Idea and Reality in Plato’s *Timaeus*’, p. 161.

his ambivalence towards imitation because an artist can give priority to a paradigm or constant structure rather than corruptibility and mutability, i.e. concentrating on the Beautiful as opposed to particular qualities that indicate it.

The Demiurge acts as a symbolic link between Form and what Plato describes as pre-existent matter, and creates the cosmos so that it exhibits the principles of order; the very characteristic of the Forms.²¹ One would not be mistaken in recognising the activity of the Demiurge as analogous to that of the artist. He describes the creation of the cosmos as being comparable to the work of a craftsman who uses models, patterns, plans or a design to construct his work. In the *Timaeus* Plato introduces us to the competent, intelligent, and good artist.²² It is interesting to note that Plato still believes the cosmos to be an organic, sensually perceived unit that belongs to the realm of becoming and because of this quality one can never gain certain knowledge about it. This is equally true when we attempt to account for the process by which it came about. Plato believes that any formulated cosmology is nothing but a “likely story” (29d) or *mythos* (but not necessarily a fiction) in the sense that it can only be a story and never absolutely ‘true’.²³ Plato’s accounts of myth and its function reveal his own artistic nature and it remains an open question when the use of a “likely story” is acceptable.²⁴

An Aesthetics Based on Metaphysics

By elucidating the fundamental ontological features of the *Timaeus* I have shown that Platonic metaphysics is not essentially committed to a strict dualism, in which the intelligible realm holds exclusive right over knowledge, and the world available to the senses need not necessarily be despised and rejected. Asmis suggests that after the *Symposium* Plato uses a new theory of Forms that allows him to portray poetry, and therefore art, in a more favourable way than any earlier dialogue.²⁵ I will now extrapolate an alternative aesthetic

²¹ Prior, *Unity and Development in Plato’s Metaphysics*, p. 96.

²² However, one must be careful not to ignore the fact that the Demiurge is an example of an ideal creator. The Demiurge creates knowing for certain that what he makes is good because he looks to the Forms. This is unlike human production where often an element of uncertainty about the outcome is natural and the role of personal interpretation is indispensable. I think Plato has *Timaeus* use the example of the Demiurge to explain the creation of the cosmos because, as the most authentic and original act of creation imaginable, he knows it is extreme and completely ideal.

²³ Gadamer, ‘Idea and Reality in Plato’s *Timaeus*’, p. 158.

²⁴ A reality produced with symbolic imagery that models itself on eternal Forms is more worthy than a representation that only replicates empirical facts. Osbourne, ‘Space, Time, Shape, and Direction’, p. 189.

²⁵ Asmis, ‘Plato on Poetic Creativity’, p. 344.

position using the metaphysics of the *Timaeus*, as opposed to that of the *Republic*.

In light of the ontology of the *Timaeus* there are a number of consequences for Plato's metaphysics and his theory of art. There is no longer the insistence that the philosopher must have a 'continual quarrel with the body', or that there exists a natural 'state of enmity between soul and body'. In fact, Devogel makes the point that the *Timaeus* spends a great deal of time discussing the problem of how man must cope with the condition of having to live in a body.²⁶ In the *Timaeus* the notion of a beautiful man does not simply consist of an enlightened soul, but includes a healthy and exercised body because the body is subservient to the soul.²⁷ This theory is consistent on a macrocosmic level as well. The concept of beauty includes the Form or intelligible essence as well as its material embodiment. As long as phenomena are governed by rational and eternal principles they qualify as 'good' creations. The same may now be said about artistic representations. According to this particular perspective, the intelligent and insightful artist can offer his audience a production that embodies eternal principles of order and beauty: a creation that has the potential to enhance instead of ruin the understanding and knowledge of the spectator. One must not neglect the fact that Timaeus' monologue is predominantly a newly created story; it is a myth that is delivered by a philosopher, statesman, and scientist who is aided by the gods to communicate his thoughts.²⁸

The construction of philosophical argument and the creation of aesthetic symbols may both be understood as forms of representation; the poets and the philosophers are both "makers" of images.²⁹ In his final work, the *Laws*, Plato stipulates conditions for poets to adhere to if they wish to be granted entry into the city to perform their dramas. The conditions are that their productions must comply with the creation produced by the lawmakers i.e. the philosophers (817).³⁰ What is interesting about this passage is that Plato has the lawmakers reply that they too are "poets", who, in competition with the dramatists make the "most beautiful drama". The drama presented by the lawmakers is an "imitation of the most beautiful and best life". De Vogel makes the point that the *Timaeus* offers possibilities for understanding the human situation i.e.

²⁶ De Vogel, *Rethinking Plato and Platonism*, p. 169.

²⁷ De Vogel, *Rethinking Plato and Platonism*, p. 172.

²⁸ Osbourne, 'Space, Time, Shape, and Direction', pp. 185-186.

²⁹ 'Makers' is the etymological meaning of *poietai*, poets. Asmis, 'Plato on Poetic Creativity', p. 338.

³⁰ Plato, 'Laws', in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

coping with the fact that one is subject to living in a body.³¹ This aspect of the *Timaeus* became a feature of Plato's later dialogues. The philosopher must affect a disposition, or create an environment that helps alleviate the uncertainty that is associated with worldly existence. In the *Laws*, Plato seems to imply that in governing the state the philosophers can only hope to imitate the best life. Like lawgivers the poets are also in search of moral goodness and the best life; by giving voice to their aspirations, poets attempt to transcend their own mortal existence.³² Like poets, Plato admits that the philosophers must perform a form of *mimesis* if their conceptual accounts are to apply to the realm of becoming.

The ontology of the *Timaeus* gives a new understanding of the phenomenal world and stipulates in clearer detail the methods by which one could acquire knowledge (initially through the senses and subsequently leading to the intellect). Plato's approach in accounting for phenomena in the *Timaeus* entails that he acknowledges the insufficiency of rational dialectic; in other words, the notion of certainty and the concept of an absolute explanation is considered dubious. The dialogue does not present an objective account of the cosmos, but, rather, it aims to explain how the external world comes to be known by the soul.³³ By way of comparison, in the *Phaedrus* Plato does for rhetoric what the *Timaeus* had done for the world of appearance: he did not debunk rhetoric outright. Instead, he constrained its use with strict criteria consisting of self-consciousness and critical examination of what is said.

Symbolism, Art and the Receptacle

The art of symbolism, in its religious or mythological and especially its poetic manifestations, is not a straightforward, 'black and white', affair for Plato, but, rather, an issue of ambiguity. Like *Eros*, "in Diotima's account in the *Symposium* [art]³⁴ is midway between heaven and earth, between reason and emotion, between mind and sense".³⁵ And since one's creative thought is orchestrated by the symbols that one constructs and encounters, Plato realised that a compromise was needed between rational dialectic and emotive rhetoric. It is true that the arts evolve out of the senses, but it is the higher senses that they appeal to, which in turn touch the soul. And if art is conducted

³¹ De Vogel, *Rethinking Plato and Platonism*, p. 169.

³² Asmis, 'Plato on Poetic Creativity', p. 346.

³³ Ashbaugh, *Plato's Theory of Explanation*, p. 1.

³⁴ In the *Symposium* Plato categorises poetic activity under the Form of beauty, thus making love its concomitant impetus. Ashbaugh, *Plato's Theory of Explanation*, p. 344.

³⁵ Elias, *Plato's Defence of Poetry*, p. 20.

appropriately it will be the nobler emotions, rather than the base ones, that will be stirred and encouraged to progress to the higher aspects of the soul.

The concept of Love in the *Symposium*, the receptacle in the *Timaeus*, and, I argue, the phenomenon of art in Plato, all function as an intermediary between Form and particular – “god and human” (202e). If cognition first occurs as a result of signification, then expression and communication develops as a result of a subsequent appropriation of signs. In relation to Forms, it is true to say that knowledge of them is acquired by first recognising that which participates in it – an embodiment or manifestation of the Form – which includes language and images. But we must clarify that representations of divine entities, such as Forms, are only beneficial if they themselves are ‘anti-divine’, meaning that they must necessarily negate themselves in order to be a genuine representation of the eternal Form. A government whose laws are recognised by citizens to be a representation of the ideal of Justice must not look at itself or its constitution as being inherently just. In certain situations its pre-established laws and systems must be abrogated if the result of their implementation excludes the rights of another individual. Perfection or full actuality must never be considered to be inherent in a representation. Instead, language and images, if they are to genuinely represent the absolute, must always allude to that which is beyond themselves. In light of these comments one can interpret a new meaning of Plato’s utterances about aspiring to a “vision of the Forms”; through one’s faculties of sense, in particular sight, one can intuit an intellectual image of the Beautiful.³⁶

The position stated above, in relation to the mediatory nature of art, has a significant metaphysical basis that is central to the cosmology of the *Timaeus*. The receptacle, or space, is the field where Form and matter unite to create an image of the eternal: “In space, sensible things are the images of intelligible forms”.³⁷ The entity of space is also the domain where thinking and sensation are forced to work in unison. Therefore, in order to explicate adequately what occupies that space both a true and a verisimilar account is needed; that is the explication must simultaneously instruct and rationally persuade.

The most efficacious symbolic medium that unifies the soul’s phenomenal experience with knowledge of the Forms is art, in particular poetry. In the same way that the Demiurge required space to combine matter and Form, man needs a manner of expression, or a style of language, to

³⁶ I am alluding to Diotima’s teachings on how to attain to the “final vision of the mysteries” (Sym. 210a).

³⁷ Ashbaugh, *Plato’s Theory of Explanation*, p. 3-4.

symbolise what consciousness confronts.³⁸ The cognitive powers of the soul do not simply consist of rational deliberation but also involve the collection of data through sense; the soul is not only confronted by intelligible Forms but also encounters sensible objects. In its attempt to give an explanation for what it has experienced, the soul recognises that two accounts apply: a true account (*alethes logos*),³⁹ and a verisimilar account (*eikos logos*).⁴⁰ The former is the discursive, rational description that one recollects, and can in turn instruct others with, whereas the latter may be described as the rationally persuasive explanation complementing the former. These two aspects apply to every exposition and are epistemologically justified if we consider how we learn from explanatory accounts. Although the logically true features of an account instruct us, it is usually through the rationally verisimilar aspect of the explication that we are guided to discovering the purely intelligible structure of the thing being explained. Verisimilar accounts often consist of rhetoric, visual art or music. But if these tools of explanation are to accompany the true account, and therefore be rational, the one who administers their use, whether in instances of philosophical argument, theatre, poetry or other forms of literature (e.g. epic), is required to have knowledge of the thing being explained (a point that we will elaborate on later). Thus, in this respect art may be considered to be the intermediary between eternal Forms and the objects of sensation, just as the informed, rational artist is one who gives intelligible form to matter. In light of these considerations the equating of the artist with the symbol of the Demiurge is inextricable.

In the process of cognition a necessary dialogue occurs between intelligibility and sense, and our understanding of the universe unfolds as a result. In the *Timaeus* the phenomenal world is described symbolically as being created by the Demiurge. But the story may be interpreted as an explanation of the process by which reason and sense construct a picture of the world that the conscious individual simultaneously encounters in experience. The world is rationally ordered and made available to the senses because it manifests the principles of intelligible things. In other words, Forms allow the mind to guide and structure one's sense experiences. Plato's myth of the Demiurge tells how a divine rational being looks to paradigms, and configures matter, in order to

³⁸ For a discussion that equates the receptacle with the alphabet and the conventional meaning of words Osbourne, 'Space, Time, Shape, and Direction', p. 204.

³⁹ According to Gadamer, Plato indicates that the true logic (*alethes logos*) of the cosmos is always available to the thinking observer. The ordering of the heavens and the illumination of the sun, in connection to their correlation with time, teach man numbers and instils in him the desire to know the physis of the universe. Gadamer, 'Idea and Reality in Plato's *Timaeus*', p. 169.

⁴⁰ Ashbaugh, *Plato's Theory of Explanation*, p. 3.

construct the cosmos. One may interpret the myth as a symbolic description of how human reason and sense cooperate with each other in a process that results in cognising a meaningful portrait of the world. Plato's myth reconciles the estrangement caused by a dichotomy of mind and sense. He avoids presenting the world as alien, obscure, and difficult to access by evoking an immediate and meaningful account using aesthetic symbols and rhetoric.

As a text itself, the *Timaeus* can be understood as a unique production of literature analogous to a uniquely created world of becoming. This interpretation gives weight to the view that symbolic language can reproduce ideas by representing them in literary form; in the case of the *Timaeus* the aim is to communicate the significance of a world that is the instantiation of reality. Therefore, like the product of the Demiurge, the text itself – a form of symbolic literature – has the likeness of eternal Forms; thus both the cosmos and the dialogue share the same absolute paradigm.⁴¹

The possibilities for knowledge available to sentient and rational beings rest on a two-tiered structure of becoming. This structure consists of the appearances on display for the senses and a constant noetic order behind the surface.⁴² Access to the cosmos is facilitated by the experience acquired through the sense of sight, and thus has the characteristic of becoming. The cosmos, unlike true Being, must derive from something – a cause. The beauty of the world is a testament to the fixed and determinate paradigm necessary for such a creation; becoming by definition cannot be eternal, or the cause of its own logical structure. The symbol of the Demiurge represents the causal activity that leads to creation. Its presentation in a *mythos* aims to clarify the interconnectedness of Being and becoming in a meaningful way to finite human understanding. According to the theory of the *Timaeus* the possibility of really knowing something about the realm of becoming depends on recognising the copy structure in things.⁴³ And to remain commensurate with human nature, any display of knowledge gained through this process can only ever be portrayed in a “story”. In light of this explanation Plato is justified in constructing a myth to account for the beginning of becoming. It is the fact that creation exists in accordance with ultimate principles that provokes a rational explanation:

Don't therefore be surprised, Socrates, if on many matters concerning the gods and the whole world of change we are unable in every respect and on every occasion to render consistent and accurate account. You must be satisfied if our account is as likely as

⁴¹ Osbourne, 'Space, Time, Shape, and Direction', p. 179.

⁴² Gadamer, 'Idea and Reality in Plato's *Timaeus*', pp. 161-162.

⁴³ Gadamer, 'Idea and Reality in Plato's *Timaeus*', p. 162.

any, remembering that both I and you who are sitting in judgement on it are merely human, and should not look for anything more than a likely story in such matters (*Tim*, 29d).

The only form of poetry that withstands the critique of book X is “hymns to the gods and songs in praise of good individuals”.⁴⁴ If the danger of alienating oneself from one’s true character, by taking on the role of another through imitation, is avoided, then redeemable forms of poetry can be produced. Poetry in the form of hymns and epics differs significantly from any other because it does not seek to imitate with the intention of deceiving the audience; the poet does not try to give the impression that he is someone else. The imitation is implemented only with the intention to praise a worthy role model. In the performance of the poem all participating parties have complete knowledge of their relation to the individual being praised, and mutually recognise the virtues and obligations being taught. Therefore, they share a common language collectively understood to be the ethos of the state.⁴⁵ This is opposed to the poet, who fools the public into believing that he accurately represents, or actually is, the character in the poem, thus dictating or imposing an ideal onto his fellow citizens that he knows nothing about. In order to avoid this danger, poets must abide by the rule that individuals must never pretend, or be imagined, to be that which they are mimicking; the same must apply to aesthetic symbols. Both the performance of the poets and symbols must be transcended in aspiration of something more profound.

Plato’s case against the poets was an attack directed at the assumption that creation itself was of value and that the mere construction of words or materials into an audio or visual presentation was the result of true skill (*techne*).⁴⁶ The poets that Plato criticised were those who felt that to merely create an appealing work of art, which brought emotive pleasure, was worthy of praise and reverence. Plato’s issue with the poets was vanity, that is, indulgence in the representations one constructs, and attribution of truth to appearance rather than to ultimate reality. One might interpret Plato’s attack on the poets as really an attack against creating false gods, and the subsequent promotion of idolatry. This is in contrast to Plato’s use of rhetoric or myth. Plato accepts artistic representation when its symbols point to or draw the understanding closer to grasping ultimate reality: that which is explained

⁴⁴ Hans Georg Gadamer, ‘Plato and the Poets’, in *Dialogue and Dialectic – Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 65.

⁴⁵ Gadamer, ‘Plato and the Poets’, p. 66.

⁴⁶ Despite being inspired by divine madness and possession, qualities that Socrates had given a praiseworthy account of, the poetry that Plato criticised did not involve a *techne* that accounted for, or justified, knowing. Gadamer, ‘Plato and the Poets’, p. 42.

conceptually in dialectic.⁴⁷ A poet of this persuasion is in fact a philosopher whose aesthetic creation is worthless in-itself.⁴⁸ Plato would understand this form of art to be a disposable vehicle leading towards the same goal expressed conceptually by the philosophers, that is, ultimate reality.⁴⁹ The *Symposium* implies this idea of the transient nature of the preliminary steps leading towards a vision of beauty itself (211-212a). The particular beautiful things are to be considered as a “staircase” reaching for the Form of beauty ‘pure’ and ‘unmixed’. Once one attains the vision of the Beautiful one can dispense with the staircase.⁵⁰ Only in this state could one subsequently give birth not only to images of virtue but true virtue. In his discourse, Timaeus describes a world meaningfully connected with a paradigm. The words also express the paradigm, but not because of any inherent or stable connection. The structure of the account has a likeness to the Form due to the order applied by the writer. This is analogous to the way the Demiurge rationally arranges the elements within the receptacle to achieve the desired result.⁵¹

So long as poetry is viewed as mediating something that is beyond it, like, for instance, the immediacy of an experience, an emotion, or in Plato’s case the actuality of the Forms, it remains a genuine and righteous form of expression. Scholars have argued that between Plato’s theory of imitation, developed in the *Republic*, and his association with the tradition of divine inspiration, he does not come close to expounding a theory of art as self-expression, such as the view championed by the Romantics.⁵² But in the

⁴⁷ In relation to Plato’s theory of representation as a pointer to the Forms, consider Ferrari’s work on the *Phaedrus*, in which he states: “it points him, in its immediacy, towards what is not immediately appreciable”. Giovanni R.F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato’s Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 149.

Moravcsik also holds the view that Plato’s understanding of instances are that they are “useful only if they are presented and interpreted in such a way that they point beyond themselves; not only to something general, rather than particular, but also to a quality that can be seen as pervading the wide variety of manifestations”. Julius Moravcsik, *Plato and Platonism: Plato’s Conception of Appearance and Reality in Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics, and its Modern Echoes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 44.

⁴⁸ Asmis, ‘Plato on Poetic Creativity’, p. 360.

⁴⁹ According to Gadamer, Plato believes that only those poets who do not take their writing to be ultimate are to be taken seriously. Gadamer, ‘Plato and the Poets’, p. 60.

⁵⁰ Moravcsik, *Plato and Platonism*, p. 44.

⁵¹ Osbourne, ‘Space, Time, Shape, and Direction’, p. 207.

⁵² The paradigm of art and poetry for the Germans of the classical and romantic periods was that of classical antiquity. The epitome of that era was thought to be Plato despite his hostile critique of art. The German Romantics situated Plato in the history of the development of poetry by reconciling his apparently conflicting views on the subject. Gadamer, ‘Plato and the Poets’, p. 39-40.

Symposium, Plato has Diotima refer to poetic creativity as “an inner spring that wells forth from the poet’s soul and is continually replenished by communion with another”.⁵³ In fact, one may propose that an aesthetic intermediary such as poetry offers a more intimately appealing form of explanation than philosophy for it consists of symbols rather than detached philosophical concepts. ‘Real’ art or poetry – that aims to communicate another level of reality – is not a copy of a particular; a ‘thrice removed’ imitation of reality explained in the *Republic*. It is a symbol that participates in, and communicates qualities of, a reality created by the immediate experience of the artist. In the phenomenon of the artistic symbol, be it sculpture, music, poetry or other forms of literature, the artist’s experience becomes a message that can educate the recipient by giving him knowledge of something beyond the appearance that can only be acquired in an actual lived experience – an insight that only participation in the meaning of symbols can transmit. In relation to Plato’s dialogues, Gadamer states that they “...say something only to him who finds meanings beyond what is expressly stated in them and allows these meanings to take effect in him”.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to disclose a theory of art out of the philosophical ideas expressed in the *Timaeus*. In contrast to Plato’s theory of art in the *Republic*, which criticised art, and particularly poetry, based on a number of binary oppositions, the modified metaphysical basis of the *Timaeus* enabled me to represent Plato as presenting a more complex, sympathetic, and existential account of art. This analysis was intended to encourage a rethinking of Plato’s theory of art. But, more importantly, it urges us to rethink many of the other widely held positions that have been attributed to Plato. If aesthetics can be shown to be a dynamic and contextual issue for Plato, then many other topics may also be open to a wide range of diverse interpretations.

The rethinking of Plato’s theory of art in the context of the *Timaeus* is in no sense an exhaustive account of Plato’s aesthetic views, nor does it imply in any way that it represents Plato’s final or mature views concerning art. I believe the issues raised in this study are significant issues for understanding Plato’s philosophy even though they are not explicitly expressed in all of his dialogues. Extrapolating a theory of art out of the ontology of the *Timaeus* gave me the pretext to address some themes otherwise unexplored in the majority of Platonic scholarship, and often only alluded to by Plato himself.

⁵³ Asmis, ‘Plato on Poetic Creativity’, p. 346.

⁵⁴ Gadamer, ‘Plato and the Poets’, p. 71.