
The term in the title ‘chorology’ refers to a passage at the centre of the Timaeus, 52a-d, which Sallis (hereafter S) identifies as the dialogue’s most rigorous account of the χώρα, the ‘third kind’, beside forms and their imitations, needed to explain the cosmos. This is often referred to by scholars today as ‘the receptacle of becoming’ (cf. 49a5-6). Early on S notes Timaeus’ requirement, ‘With regard to everything it is most important to begin at the natural beginning’ (29b, 4 with n.3). In this book he pursues the question of the natural beginning of Timaeus’ cosmology, and finds it in the metaphysical account of the chora (a term he refuses to translate, cf. 115-18), as the precondition for the construction of the cosmos as an image of true being: that in which the cosmos appears.

The book forms part of a dialogue with the continental philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer (cf. ‘Idea and Reality in Plato’s Timaeus’, ch.7 of Dialogue and Dialectic, New Haven 1980) and Jacques Derrida (Khôra, Paris 1993). In the background, of course, looms the figure of Martin Heidegger, who is briefly but severely corrected in this work for failing in ‘any originary engagement with the Platonic discourse on the χώρα’ (111 n.22). S follows Derrida in finding in this chora the mark of the original unthinkable that led the later Heidegger to have the word ‘Being’ (das Sein) printed crossed out, and to write of the ‘place of Being’. S’s strategy, though, has more in common with Derrida’s, reading the Timaeus so as systematically to identify ‘interruptions’ in Timaeus’ speech (previously noted by Gadamer), and ‘displacements’ of its metaphysics resulting from the effort to reach, and begin from, the beginning in explaining the cosmos (cf. also Gadamer 173-76).

For all that this philosophical genealogy and subject matter is inevitably daunting to some and unacceptable to others, the book is remarkably easy and inoffensive to read. It takes the form of a running commentary on the Timaeus, divided into chapters respectively on the setting of Timaeus’ speech, the creative activity of the divine craftsman (the ‘Demiurge’), the focal account of the chora, and its reappearance subsequently in the speech. The concluding chapter first examines Aristotle’s responsibility for the blasé debased interpretation of the chora as ‘Plato’s conception of matter’
which closed off philosophical awareness from the implications of its peculiar unthinkable. Secondly the final chapter identifies in Schelling a recovery of Plato’s original thinking about the *chora*, based on the evidence of Schelling’s early study of the *Timaeus* and interpretation of his subsequent philosophy of nature.

S’s scholarship is creditable: he has used the major commentaries, from Proclus to Cornford, as well as Plutarch and Plotinus, and follows out twentieth-century English speaking interpretive debate insofar as it bears on the text (e.g. 65-68, 101-5 with n.13). He also introduces English readers to some recent French studies of the *Timaeus* which may be of interest (cf. 53 n.9, 77 n.42), and even borrows ideas from the other main non-analytic (if the term is not passé) philosophical tradition concerned with Plato, the Straussian. Thus he incorporates Stanley Rosen’s account of the suppression of *eros* in the *Republic* (cf. 26 n.27) in his depiction of the *Republic*-like discussion of the previous day that Socrates reports in the *Timaeus*: this was an unnatural discourse of the head alone (13-14, cf. τὸ κεφάλαιον, 17c: ‘the capital point’, and the comic depiction of the human head alone at 44d-e; and S 24-27 on Platonic comedy).

On this basis S develops an opposition between the technical (heady) and the natural (glossed ‘erotic’), which is used to question the metaphysical coherence of the productive and reproductive imagery of the *Timaeus* (see, e.g., 52). Subsequently, in the book’s final section on the *Timaeus* (138-45), where S proposes the political significance of the dialogue, this interpretive theme leads to a novel ‘Platonic’ proportionality: as the metaphysical *chora* stands to being and becoming, so territory (also *chora*) stands to Socrates’ ideal city and Critias’ city at war (mythical proto-Athens). The beneficiary of this insight is supposed to be Hermocrates, the silent listener throughout, who historically had so much to do with resisting Athenian territorial aggression in 415-13 BC. S presumably understands this as an antidote to the *Republic*’s ‘official’ doctrine.

Other devices used to unsettle our normal ways of thinking about the text include the following. S elaborates Gadamer’s remark that the foundational distinction between being and becoming (27d-28a), justified by the distinction between intelligence (*nous*) and opinion (*doxa*), is introduced merely as Timaeus’ *opinion* (27d5) (49). He observes that the
creation of soul from a blending including, among its ingredients, indivisible being and sameness means that there is being within generated soul, and even worse, consequently, within the generated cosmos, contrary to both the introductory distinction and the explicit principle of the 'chorology' (that being cannot be in becoming, 52d) (69-70). Prior to a study of the use of triads, beginning with Socrates' counting of three hosts (7-9) and extending to the varieties of listings of the three kinds (124-25), S notes that what are ultimately to be counted are certainly not three kinds of beings, nor even properly, if a kind is a form, three kinds at all (8-9).

Systematically S seeks to lead the reader to evidence of intrinsic textual incoherence. Perhaps this is true of all texts read a certain way. Similarly, he notes initially the problem of authorial distance (1): written by Plato, a speech attributed to Timaeus, whereas nothing is attributed to Plato: an inescapably double-voiced, unattributable discourse. But S is no Derrida, and certainly S does not treat Plato as a victim of writing. Plato has written like this, and reached the chorology by means of interruptions to the linearity of Timaeus' speech, precisely as a way of saying what cannot be reached and said in accordance with the metaphysical paradigm that reduces the chora to 'Plato's conception of matter'. For S, the chorology teaches that the 'opening of metaphysics' with the 'twofold of being' (original and image) is at the same time its 'displacing' by the abyss of the chora (123).

The thought here seems to be that an original glimpse into the unthinkable 'meaninglessness' of the chora contains a revitalising reality check in relation to the danger of a heady misunderstanding of the talk about forms and being in the dialogues, the kind of misunderstanding that is also confronted in a different way by the Parmenides. The alternative suggested even by Gadamer, influenced by the Tübingen School ('Idea and Reality', 172, cf. 157), is to attribute both the forms and the receptacle ultimately to the One and the Indefinite Dyad as causes. It is easy to see how the latter move tends to reduce life to the relations among concepts, and so precipitates the postmodern rejection of all metaphysics as 'Platonism'.

Nevertheless what strikes me about S's book is that despite his approach, radically different from that practised in analytic discussions of Plato's philosophy and texts, his preoccupation has something peculiarly in
common with these: Plato is approached primarily in relation to his talk about being, not about life. S’s pages on political significance provide little more than a metaphysics of the city. Life in the city is reduced to a symbol: territorial war. *The Laws*, among other works, suggests that is not the whole story (cf. 1.625c-32d); and the reasons why have to do with the human soul. The *Timaeus* certainly contains a metaphysics of the soul, based on the account of being and becoming, but S seems to betray recognition that much more about the soul is depicted in Platonic dialogues by the dramatisation, myths and incidental details than by metaphysical theories. If the talk about forms were understood in this context, as an ideal measure of human potential, what we would be ‘thrown back’ upon for revitalisation would not be meaninglessness at all, but the worth of our souls.

Dougal Blyth
University of Auckland