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# Husserl's *Timaeus*. Plato's Creation Myth and the Phenomenological Concept of Metaphysics as the Teleological Science of the World

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**Abstract:** According to Husserl, Plato played a fundamental role in the development of the notion of teleology, so much so that Husserl viewed the myth narrated in the *Timaeus* as a fundamental stage in the long history that he hoped would eventually lead to a teleological science of the world grounded in transcendental phenomenology. This article explores this interpretation of Plato's legacy in light of Husserl's thesis that Plato was the initiator of the ideal of genuine science. It also outlines how Husserl sought conceptual resources within transcendental phenomenology to turn the key elements of Plato's creation myth into rigorous scientific ideas.

**Keywords:** Husserl, Plato, *Timaeus*, teleology, metaphysics, creation, God.

Husserl expressed several times his firm belief that Plato's role in the history of philosophy was without equal. According to Husserl, Plato is the single most important figure not only in European philosophy, but also in the entire history of European civilization. The historical role that Husserl attributes to Plato has been the object of a recent article by Claudio Majolino.<sup>1</sup> Majolino's systematic analysis provides the starting point for the present study. He has conclusively shown that, for Husserl, "*in some sense*, philosophy as such is Platonic."<sup>2</sup> This "sense" does not imply adherence to Plato's own philosophical

<sup>1</sup> Majolino 2018: especially 166–178.

<sup>2</sup> Majolino 2018: 167.

views; rather, it is the sense that philosophical investigation derives from Plato's invention of the idea of genuine philosophy ("*echte Philosophie*").<sup>3</sup> Plato overcame the Sophists' skeptical critique of Presocratic philosophy, notably by discovering ideal laws immune to such skepticism and by establishing a *doctrine of the principles* "whose fundamental task is to investigate not the whole of factual being, but the 'principles' of all that is and can be known."<sup>4</sup> Thus, Majolino speaks of a "Platonic 'second birth of philosophy.'"<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I will reconstruct the specific role that, according to Husserl, Plato has played in the birth of the teleological/theological consideration of reality. Thus, the object of this study is the Platonic source of what Husserl considered a fundamental desideratum of phenomenological philosophy, viz., metaphysics as the science of the "ultimate and highest questions." It will appear that the account of creation that Husserl envisaged as a key component of such a discipline can be seen as an attempted scientific translation of Plato's myth. In other words, Husserl was seeking within his transcendental philosophy the conceptual resources to turn what Plato saw as accessible only to the language of myth into an object of rigorous investigation.

### 1. *The Highest Science of Reality and the Ultimate Ontological Problem*

On several occasions, Husserl proclaimed that the phenomenological concept of metaphysics is not exhausted by the transformation of the sciences of nature and spirit into ultimate sciences of reality by means of the system of formal and material eidetic sciences ultimately grounded in transcendental phenomenology.<sup>6</sup> The elucidation of the factual world, the clarification of the essence and sense of being (*Seinssinn*) of its different ontological regions is a necessary step towards the final and highest consideration of factual reality, the "*höchste Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*"<sup>7</sup> in which nature and spirit are reconsidered in light of axiological, practical, and, beyond these, teleological and theological principles.<sup>8</sup> Such principles are established by corresponding eidetic sciences, which constitute the part of "*reine Philosophie als Ideenlehre*"<sup>9</sup> functioning as a premise for this final level of metaphysics as an *a posteriori* doctrine of being. This second level of metaphysics comprises what Husserl often characterizes as the "ultimate and highest questions" concerning the

<sup>3</sup> Majolino 2018: 168.

<sup>4</sup> Majolino 2018: 171.

<sup>5</sup> Majolino 2018: 172.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Hua XXVIII: 182, Hua VII: 187–188. For the origin of the concept of metaphysics as philosophical completion of the positive sciences, see Trizio 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Hua XXVIII: 230.

<sup>8</sup> Hua XXVIII: 180.

<sup>9</sup> Hua XXVIII: 229.

problem of the sense of history, of human life, and of the world, as well as the problems of God, of immortality, and of the possibility of a truly happy human existence.<sup>10</sup> The central theme of this metaphysical discipline is the “sense of the world,” i.e., the problem of the existence of a teleological orientation within the totality of being, and of God as the ultimate source of such a teleology.<sup>11</sup> Now, it is in relation to the idea of this teleological source that Husserl introduces what he calls “the ultimate ontological problem” (*letztes Seinsproblem*).<sup>12</sup> It is “the problem of *creation*, of the realizing force (*realisierenden Kraft*) of the absolute Ideal,” i.e., the problem of how God, conceived as an ideal that, as such, is not a reality in space and time, can not only function as a regulative principle for factual reality but also as a realizing one.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the solution of this ultimate, ontological problem at the eidetic level, what is required is a method that can be applied to the factually existing world in order to determine whether it is a world of God (“*ob diese faktische Welt faktisch eine Gotteswelt ist*”).<sup>14</sup> In other words, the eidetic, ultimate, ontological problem of creation, following Husserl’s cardinal distinction between pure philosophy as *Ideenlehre* and metaphysics as the absolute science of factual reality, is a preliminary step in addressing its factual, *a posteriori* counterpart.<sup>15</sup>

On the basis of these sketchy and programmatic statements, we can appreciate how Husserl connects the desideratum of this ultimate science of reality to a tradition that was inaugurated by Plato himself. As early as 1911, Husserl evokes the role that the Form of the good exerts within Plato’s philosophy, which he saw as parallel to that of God. This parallel is articulated in

<sup>10</sup> Hua I: 193. As Daniele De Santis has noted, it would be wrong to think that there are two different concepts of metaphysics. Rather, there are two parts of metaphysics that correspond to the distinction between theoretical reason, on the one hand, and axiological and practical reason, on the other (De Santis 2018: 66 n5). At both levels of phenomenological metaphysics, what is in question is an elucidation of factual reality in light of eidetic disciplines. An early, interesting discussion of Husserl’s conception of God is in Strasser 1959. See also Dupré 1968, Harnet 2000, and Housset 2010. For the claim that Husserl’s theological considerations are at odds with his own philosophical method, see Held 2010 and, more extensively, De Palma 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Hua Mat IX: 105; Briefwechsel VI: 98.

<sup>12</sup> Hua XXVIII: 180–181.

<sup>13</sup> “*Kann überhaupt eine Idee, und nun gar eine Gottesidee, als die oberste normative Idee möglicher Weltwirklichkeit überhaupt, das faktische Dasein (das faktische Sein, Sosein, Sich-so-fort-Entwickeln) der Wirklichkeit nicht nur normativ, sondern realisierend regeln?*” (Hua XXVIII: 181).

<sup>14</sup> Hua XXVIII: 181.

<sup>15</sup> See also the following question raised in a text written in the mid 1920s: “Und kann die Geschichte eine Wahrscheinlichkeit dafür geben, irgendwie vergleichbar mit der empirischen Wahrscheinlichkeit eines ‘wahren Seins’ der Natur, dass Die Welt eine ‘Gotteswelt’ ist?” (Hua XLII: 378). This is a clear example of a question concerning the evaluation of factual reality in light of an eidetic discipline: I must first have knowledge of the essence of “*Gotteswelt*” in general, in order to decide whether there is any empirical evidence that we live in one such world. Note, further, the interesting analogy with the (only probable) factual existence of the nature of exact sciences.

the following way:<sup>16</sup> (1) Within Plato's thought, the form of the good plays the role of God. (2) It is not a reality in the literal (spatiotemporal or even psychological) sense of the word, not even the totality of worldly reality. It is something wholly different from spatiotemporal reality as such. (3) Yet, "according to Plato, it is the ultimate source of being,"<sup>17</sup> the reason for this being twofold. (3i) First, it is the ontological source of all Forms of possible realities, thus of all paradigms that jointly make up the paradigm of the most perfect world. In other words, the Form of the good, as the "sun in the realm of Forms," is the source of the very *a priori* pattern of the best possible world. (3ii) Second, and this is what Husserl has just called the ultimate ontological problem, that of *creation*, the Form of the good, while not being a reality, while having first and foremost the normative/regulative function of an Ideal, must also have a "realizing force":

Sie soll eine realisierende Kraft sein, demnach doch in gewissem Sinn "Realität", sogar letzte, absolute Realität, letzter Seinsgrund für alles empirische Sein und teleologischer Seinsgrund; was also besagen würde, daß jedes empirische Sein an seiner Stelle durch die Idee des Guten Gefordertes und aufgrund dieser idealen Forderung notwendig Seiendes und Soseiendes ist, oder daß jedes notwendig ist als Phase der Entwicklung, die zum Sein unaufhebbar gehört und die Entwicklung gegen ideale Ziele hin ist, Seinsentwicklung unter idealen Normen ist.<sup>18</sup>

As is clear, the teleological regulation deriving from the Form of the good bestows upon each empirical, factual being the necessity that it inherently lacks precisely *qua* fact. But this necessity is not that of an empirical causal relation. Such causal relations belong to spatiotemporal reality and depend on empirical laws which are themselves contingent. Causal relations are intermundane, contingent regulations that stand themselves in need of an ultimate teleological ground. In phenomenological terms, causality belongs to constituted being only, and, thus, presupposes the motivational / teleological structure of constituting subjectivity.<sup>19</sup> The "*realisierende Kraft*" of the Form of the good, the ultimate nature of which remains here unspecified, is, thus, connected to a "*Forderung*," a "demand," more precisely a *moral demand*. Accordingly, in the second lecture on Fichte, Husserl characterizes Plato's Form of the Good as "the teleological cause (*teleologische Ursache*) of the given world of the senses."<sup>20</sup> As

<sup>16</sup> Hua XXVIII: 181.

<sup>17</sup> Hua XXVIII: 181.

<sup>18</sup> Hua XXVIII: 181. My emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> "*Kausalität ist eine konstituierende Realitätsform innerhalb des konstituierten Seins, gehört also zugleich unter dem Aspekt der Bewußtseinskonstitution in die Teleologie*" (Hua XXVIII: 226). See also Hua III: 122.

<sup>20</sup> Hua XXV: 278.

such, however, by virtue of this creative power, this force of realization, the Form of the good, while not being in any sense an empirical reality, has the status of “a reality in an enhanced sense, super-reality (*Über-Realität*), that superempirically, supernaturally makes all empirical reality arise.”<sup>21</sup>

In the following sections, I will discuss the way in which Husserl, in the notes on the history of teleology and, in particular, on the *Timaeus*, which he wrote a few years later, and which form a part of the volume *Einleitung in die Philosophie, Vorlesungen 1916–1920*, spelled out in detail the connection, here briefly evoked, between his own project of metaphysics as a teleological/theological science of reality and Plato's conception of the normative function of the Forms with respect to empirical reality. As we shall see, Husserl was bound to reflect on the fact that the inventor of the idea of genuine philosophy and of the doctrine of principles, in short, *the founder of the European ideal of scientificity*, did not find any language more suitable for these questions than that of the myth.

## 2. Plato and the Emergence of the Ancient Teleological Worldview

The 1916–1920 lectures are interesting at least in two respects. On the one hand, unlike other introductions to philosophy written by Husserl, they approach the subject matter in an essentially historical way. It is also noteworthy that, in comparison with other historical narratives that we find in Husserl's corpus, this lecture is particularly rich in analyses concerning ancient philosophy, and notably Plato and Aristotle. In addition, it contains a number of observations about parts of the history of philosophy often neglected by Husserl, such as the Presocratics, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. For this reason, these lectures help fill in some of the gaps of the usual Husserlian narrative about the development of Western Philosophy, as we find it in texts such as *First Philosophy* and the *Krisis*. On the other hand, within this historical narrative, the role of the teleological consideration of the world holds center stage. This feature is unique in Husserl's entire corpus.

A central Husserlian thesis is that ancient philosophy never completely overcame the objectivism that characterized it from its very beginning.<sup>22</sup> Even the skeptical motive that arose with the sophists and shook the foundations of the earlier, naively objectivistic philosophy did not lead to the breakthrough necessary for the discovery of the correlation between being and transcendental subjectivity. What are the repercussions of this fact on the development of a teleological account of reality? In other words, what was the fate of

<sup>21</sup> Hua XXVIII: 181.

<sup>22</sup> See Hua VI: 168. In particular, the Presocratics and the sophists could only anticipate the real sense of the correlation. Among the former, Husserl is here referring to Parmenides (see Hua XXV: 135).

teleological considerations in a context in which “*the silent weight of the natural attitude on the overall philosophical attitude still remains unnoticed?*”<sup>23</sup> One can view the entire section of the course *Einleitung in die Philosophie* entitled *Teleologie*<sup>24</sup> as an attempt to answer this question. Husserl considers in turn the emergence of teleology in the cosmology of the Presocratics, its rejection on the part of the atomists, and its rehabilitation by Plato and Aristotle in the wake of the sophists’ skepticism. As we shall see, Husserl’s reading of Plato’s *Timaeus* is the central episode of this narrative and can only be understood in relation to its overall sense.

Husserl invokes the terms “*teleologische Welterklärung*” or “*teleologische Weltanschauung*” as umbrella terms covering any teleological accounts of the world, whether purely mythological-poetic or (at least tentatively) scientific, while he reserves the expression “*teleologische Weltwissenschaft*” for an (at least partially developed, self-conscious) attempt to turn a teleological explanation of the world or worldview into a *scientific* one. For Husserl, only this eminent, scientific sense of a teleological account of reality deserves to be called “metaphysical,”<sup>25</sup> and, actually, as we know, “metaphysical” in the highest and ultimate sense of the term. Unsurprisingly, for a long time, ancient philosophy could not reach the level of a scientific teleological worldview. Initially, according to Husserl, it was still under the influence of animistic or hylozoistic conceptions of matter—witness the early teleological worldview of Xenophanes and Heraclitus.<sup>26</sup> A step further was accomplished by what Husserl sees as the first dualistic cosmologies, i.e., those of Empedocles and Anaxagoras. Rather than identifying “being and being alive”<sup>27</sup> after the hylozoistic conception, Empedocles introduced the distinction between, on the one hand, four material elements, and, on the other, the forces explaining their movements, mixture and separation: love and strife. These moving powers are psychic in character and, thus, explain the natural phenomena in a “spiritual” and finalistic way, although they do not point back to an ultimately divine subject holding sway over the workings of nature. A progress within this early dualistic, teleological accounts of reality is accomplished by Anaxagoras’ doctrine of the *nous*, conceived as an ordering principle of the world.<sup>28</sup> In all such early finalistic worldviews, however, the teleological principles explaining natural phenomena in a somewhat “spiritual” way are immanent to physical reality, even when, in the case of the last two philosophers mentioned, they are opposed to purely physical elements. In other words, what we witness here

<sup>23</sup> Majolino 2018: 176.

<sup>24</sup> Hua Mat IX: 181–215.

<sup>25</sup> Hua Mat IX: 189.

<sup>26</sup> Hua Mat IX: 190–191. On page 190, the text reads “Xenophon,” but this is obviously an oversight.

<sup>27</sup> Hua Mat IX: 191.

<sup>28</sup> Hua Mat IX: 192.



are attempts to see an ordering principle, a rationality at work in the world *from within it*. Husserl also reminds us that Presocratic philosophy did not beget only these early teleological accounts of nature, but also the first sketch of a materialistic monism in the form of atomistic cosmology.<sup>29</sup> Leucippus and Democritus characterized both the atoms and the forces that determine their movements and the way they give rise to different types of aggregates by appealing to properties that, being completely mechanical, rule out all considerations of finality.<sup>30</sup> In sum, in its initial stage, philosophy was already a battlefield between teleological and naturalistic-causal worldviews, and, in keeping with its thematic orientation, the disagreement was about positing or rejecting teleological principles *immanent in nature*.

At this point, as we know, the sophists' skeptical onslaught brings into question the rights of Presocratic cosmology to be a rationally grounded knowledge of the world. In these lectures, Husserl does not insist on the nature of this first skeptical wave, but he cursorily characterizes its result as a *crisis* affecting the development of Greek philosophy.<sup>31</sup> The first attempt to deploy the inner potential of the *theoretical attitude* and to achieve an objective determination of the world conceived as a totality could not withstand this powerful criticism. Philosophy underwent a crisis precisely in the sense that its scientificity, its right to be the universal science of being, became questionable, to say the least.<sup>32</sup> As already indicated, Husserl credits the overcoming of this crisis to Socrates and, most of all, Plato. Now philosophy is no longer conceived as an uncritical attempt to rationally determine the world, but as a genuine science governed by *a priori* principles. At this point, Husserl interestingly links Plato's reaction to this early skepticism to his views about the possibility of a genuine science of nature.

Indessen, die ganze Krise, welche die Entwicklung der griechischen Philosophie schicksalsvoll bestimmte, ließ aus dem Atomismus doch nicht eine systematische Begründung einer Naturwissenschaft erwachsen. Die skeptische Lähmung, welche die griechische Philosophie oder Wissenschaft betraf, wurde durch Sokrates und Platon in einer Form überwunden, die einer Entwicklung

<sup>29</sup> Hua Mat IX: 192.

<sup>30</sup> "Damit fällt also auch jede teleologische Welterklärung. Es gibt nur mechanische Naturerklärung" (Hua Mat IX: 193). The opposition in the name of atomism to a teleological worldview, and, particularly, to a providential one, is vividly expressed by Lucretius (*De Rerum Naturae*, II 167–181).

<sup>31</sup> Hua Mat IX: 194.

<sup>32</sup> To my knowledge, this is the first time Husserl uses the word "crisis" in the sense in which he will systematically use it from the 1930s onward. For a general characterization of this concept, see Trizio 2016. The parallel between this early crisis of Presocratic philosophy and the crisis of modern philosophy that Husserl will describe a few years later runs deep, since in both cases the crisis follows a *skeptical moment*: the sophists in the ancient world, Hume in the modern era (Hua VI: 90).

der Naturwissenschaft nicht günstig war, obschon Platon doch gerade durch seinen Idealismus nach verschiedenen Richtungen die wichtigsten Vorbedingungen für eine exakte Naturwissenschaft beistellte.<sup>33</sup>

Why, in the case of nature and natural science, did Plato fail to overcome the sophists' skepticism, which, thanks to the discovery of the *a priori*, he successfully countered in domains such as ethics and mathematics? According to Husserl, this skepticism is epitomized by Protagoras' thesis that there is "no truth in itself"<sup>34</sup> in any sphere of judgement. Plato's theory of Forms, of course, grounded in his discovery of the eidetic intuition, postulated a realm of perfectly objective entities, supratemporal and unchanging, independent from all contingent features of the knowing subjectivity. The Forms are at the same time absolutely objective and fully perfect beings, corresponding to norms to which any empirical reality should conform. As Husserl acknowledges in the last passage, Plato's "idealism" was bound to give a strong impulse to the development of those *a priori*, mathematical disciplines without which no rigorous science of nature can arise. Yet, in fact, it did not lead to the birth of a real science of nature. Why? Husserl's answer comprises the following three steps.

(1) A science of nature "in the rigorous sense," i.e., one that "corresponds to the idea of true being,"<sup>35</sup> is only possible if a method is available to determine nature by virtue of predicates that are not subjective-relative. This is precisely the objectivity that pertains to mathematical truths. However, Protagoras had argued that all judgments based on experience are relative to the constitution of the sense organs. Now, Plato did not see how the objectivity of mathematical truths could be used in order to overcome this relativity, in spite of his familiarity with the practically fruitful application of geometry to measurement techniques. Simply put, Husserl claims that Plato was unable to make the breakthrough that two thousand years later would be Galileo's most decisive (albeit "fateful") accomplishment: *he did not idealize nature itself*. The application of geometry to spatiotemporal properties was not followed by the co-idealization of the "sensible *plena*" described in detail in §9 of the *Krisis*. The fullness of the *res materialis*, with his stock of directly and indirectly mathematizable properties, could not be seen as a true natural object, a reality mathematically determined in itself, manifesting itself through its sensible appearances and obeying exact natural laws likewise mathematical in character. Thus, natural phenomena, in their subjective-relative instability, could not count as the manifestation of a real being endowed with objective, idealized properties. "Accordingly, there is for him no nature existing in itself; the nature given to the senses contains no theoretically determinable

<sup>33</sup> Hua Mat IX: 94.

<sup>34</sup> Hua Mat IX: 195.

<sup>35</sup> Hua Mat IX: 195.

being-in-itself.”<sup>36</sup> Now, if the vague, inconstant, subjective-relative nature is, so to speak, the *last word* on the spatiotemporal world, if there is no true nature in itself “beyond” it, then nature itself is not an ultimately real being. “The world of the senses is for him a world of illusions (*Scheinwelt*) and not a world of appearances (*Erscheinungswelt*), that is the subjectively variable appearance of a true world.”<sup>37</sup> Let us note that this discussion of Plato’s inability to overcome Protagoras’ skepticism with respect to the world of experience completely agrees with Husserl’s subsequent characterization of the difference between Plato and Galileo in the famous initial sentence of §9 of the *Krisis*:

For Platonism, the real had a more or less perfect methexis in the ideal. This afforded ancient geometry possibilities of a primitive application to reality. [But] through Galileo’s mathematization of nature, nature itself is idealized under the guidance of the new mathematics; nature itself becomes—to express it in a modern way—a mathematical manifold [*Mannigfaltigkeit*].<sup>38</sup>

These lectures, though, do not spell out the reason for this crucial difference between Plato and Galileo (and, consequently, between the ancient and the modern era). In the *Krisis*, instead, Husserl will insist on the revolutionizing force of the new scientific ideal accompanying the rise of modern mathematics, with its infinite domain of idealities determinable *a priori*.<sup>39</sup> Instead, as already stressed, they reconstruct the trajectory of the notion of teleology with a scope and a depth that are completely lacking in the *Krisis*.<sup>40</sup>

(2) Admittedly, Democritus had already equated nature’s inner being with a world of purely mathematical determinations, and, similarly to Protagoras, denounced the subjective-relative character of experience. He lacked nonetheless any actual method for carrying out the reduction of observable phenomena to the ultimate atomic constituents of reality and to the exact laws governing their behavior. Thus, Plato had good reasons to regard ancient atomism as “a merely hypothetical interpretation,”<sup>41</sup> i.e., a hypothetical metaphysical interpretation of nature, rather than the emergence of a genuine *science* of nature.

<sup>36</sup> Hua Mat IX: 195.

<sup>37</sup> Hua Mat IX: 195.

<sup>38</sup> Hua VI: 23.

<sup>39</sup> Hua VI: 18–20.

<sup>40</sup> Majolino has rightly observed that, in Husserl’s eyes, Galileo, while certainly a representative of the broad tradition of what Husserl calls Platonism, is actually not a Platonist in the narrow sense, for he does not endorse the distinction between a realm of Forms and an empirical (quasi-)world of particulars that cannot exactly instantiate them (Majolino 2018: 172 n9). To restate the point once more, for Plato, it cannot be the case that nature is a book written in “*lingua mathematica*,” as Galileo famously maintained. As we shall see, even Plato’s geometrical conception of the four elements in the *Timaeus* does not undermine this conclusion.

<sup>41</sup> Hua Mat IX: 196.

(3) The other important factor motivating Plato's dismissal of ancient atomism lies in the already stressed incompatibility between the latter and the ethical, political, and more broadly "spiritual" character of the interest he had inherited from Socrates.<sup>42</sup> The reductionist, anti-teleological worldview stemming from ancient atomism could not satisfy in the least a philosopher whose life-goal was to determine the conditions for a meaningful practical and political life in a likewise meaningful, teleologically oriented, and, thus, spiritualized world.

According to Husserl, the joint result of these factors explains Plato's choice to embrace not only a teleological account of nature but an account based upon a poetical and mythical narrative. Otherwise stated, they explain both the teleological inspiration and the literary form of Plato's *Timaeus*:

So gab es für ihn keine Physik und somit keine Naturerklärung im Sinne der Naturwissenschaft, für ihn gab es nur eine teleologische Weltbetrachtung. Freilich, zu einer teleologischen Weltwissenschaft drang er auch nicht durch. Er tat, was er tun konnte, er zeichnete mit den Mitteln seines Idealismus als eine von philosophischen Impulsen geleitete künstlerische Schöpfung den Mythos einer teleologischen Weltanschauung im *Timaios*. Sie ist von nicht geringer Bedeutung als die erste auf dem Fundament des Apriori versuchte Teleologie, reich an Motiven von historischer Fernkraft.<sup>43</sup>

A "teleological myth," or a cosmogony in a mythical form, is, according to Husserl, a consequent upshot of Plato's philosophy and of its role in the development of ancient thought. Admittedly, while Husserl explains in detail why Plato could not find a way to develop a mathematical/causal science of nature, in this passage, without adding any further explanation, he jumps to the conclusion that Plato "did not make the breakthrough to a teleological world-science either." The reason for his jumping to this conclusion is straightforward: since the world of the senses (Plato's world of particulars) does not satisfy the exact *a priori* norms that Plato had discovered, it is a *Scheinwelt*, and a *Scheinwelt* cannot be the object of any science, whether causal or teleological in character.<sup>44</sup> If this is the case, according to Husserl, Plato's recourse to myth does not mark the ascent to themes that are too complex and lofty to be fully grasped by the human mind, but to subject-matters that, by virtue of their very nature, do not admit of a fully rational explanation. Be that as it may, the conclusion of this passage contains a highly significant remark: no matter how poetic and imaginative, Plato's narrative nevertheless presupposes the theory of Forms, and, thus, his own discovery of the *a priori*. In other words, the myth of the *Timaeus* remains a poetic foray into a conceptual space that only

<sup>42</sup> Hua Mat IX: 196.

<sup>43</sup> Hua Mat IX: 196.

<sup>44</sup> This reflects quite well what Plato himself says, see *Timaeus* 29c-d.

Plato's chief theoretical achievement can disclose. It is a mythological narrative blossoming from within an idealistic ontology, and motivated by a corresponding epistemology, not the exercise of a self-standing imagination meant to oust the theoretical attitude of the philosopher. Thus, it is unsurprising that this myth was bound to exert a lasting influence on subsequent attempts to develop a *scientific* teleological worldview.<sup>45</sup>

### 3. Husserl's "Interpretation/Fortbildung" of Plato's Teleological Worldview

In this section, I will analyze the passage of *Die Einleitung in die Philosophie* (1916–1920) in which Husserl discusses Plato's *Timaeus*.<sup>46</sup> As it will be clear (and as it is to be expected), Husserl reworks here some (but not all) of the central ideas of Plato's creation myth in light of his own teleological/theological notions. Husserl is aware that he is partly interpreting, partly completing Plato's narrative,<sup>47</sup> and we sense from the outset that adherence to the original text is not what matters in these pages, which are otherwise very carefully written. Rather, and more interestingly, we find a reenactment of Plato's myth in which Husserl himself replaces Timaeus as the narrator, and Plato's theory of Forms is reinterpreted-transfigured in light of Husserl's own account of the opposition between fact and essence, of the different forms of reason (theoretical, axiological, and practical) along with the corresponding attitudes, and, ultimately, of the correlation between subjectivity and objectivity. Thus, the result is, to an extent, a "rational reconstruction" of Plato's myth, whereby some of its fundamental elements are, in a way, "transcendentally deduced" from the demand that the existence and nature of the empirical world be accounted for within a philosophy granting to the Forms the status of reality *par excellence*. Yet, Husserl does not carry out this rational reconstruction completely, nor does he intend to do so, even with regard to those key ideas of Plato's teleological worldview to which he ascribes a living and

<sup>45</sup> Fronterotta's remarks on the status of Timaeus' myth are particularly illuminating. They can be summed up as follows: (1) The ontological distinction between forms and particulars entails an epistemological distinction whereby no absolutely stable cognition of the nature and origin of the latter is possible, and this justifies the use of the language of myth. (2) The myth in question (a point that Husserl only hints at) is *only likely* (ἐικότα μῦθον) and cannot be identified with narratives that are simply false, such as a fairytale. (3) Furthermore, because Timaeus' myth includes the use of mathematical knowledge (especially in the parts that concern the elements), it acquires an even higher degree of plausibility and stability (Fronterotta 2005: 25–30, see also Fronterotta 2007). Husserl does not even evoke this last point, and this is to be regretted, since it highlights in a way coherent with his overall conception of knowledge that the distance between a mythological cosmogony/cosmology and a truly scientific account of nature is reduced if the former relies on the mathematical element essential to the latter.

<sup>46</sup> Hua Mat IX: 196–201.

<sup>47</sup> "ein Gemisch von Interpretation und Fortbildung" (Hua Mat IX: 199).

enduring value. Otherwise stated, he does not completely interpret away or rationalize this narrative whose mythological form, as we have just seen, he deemed to have been necessitated by Plato's very conception of worldly being. Obviously, this is not because he concurs with Plato that the εἶδη are the supreme "paradigmatic" reality and, thus, the only object of genuine science. Rather, the mythological residue of Husserl's own reconstruction counts here as the indication of possible research that one could carry out in a rigorous scientific way on the terrain of phenomenological philosophy only, and, more specifically, of phenomenological metaphysics as the teleological science of the world. Whereas, for Plato, the myth is the λόγος of the domain of what "never is and always becomes,"<sup>48</sup> for Husserl, it is a prophecy of a science yet to come, one the proper objective domain of which still awaits to be disclosed at the time he is writing. Let us now delve into what certainly deserves to be called Husserl's *Timaeus*.

As we said, the empirical world, for Plato, is a *Scheinwelt* and, as such, is not the object of a scientific investigation. Yet, its existence and nature, as well as its relation to the world of Forms, do raise meaningful philosophical questions. After all, such a world is not "a mere nothing";<sup>49</sup> it is positively characterized by a fundamental feature (*Grundeigenschaft*<sup>50</sup>), viz., *change*: the empirical world is a "*Werdenswelt*."<sup>51</sup> Husserl connects this fundamental feature to the fact that both the existence and the being so and so of this changing world are *contingent*, and such a formulation unmistakably coincides with his usual characterization of the contingency of matters of fact as opposed to eidetic necessity. A fact is precisely that which could have been different, or never have been at all. Further, if one turns to the immanent causal regulation of the empirical world, which connects facts to one another, one realizes that it depends on laws that are themselves factual.<sup>52</sup> This means that the way facts change, their losing and acquiring this or that eidetic trait, to resort to Husserl's own jargon, is itself contingent. Ultimately, the existence and the temporal evolution of the entire world appears as a contingent (i.e., *irrational*) fact, thus requiring an explanation: "Why does this changing world [*Werdenswelt*] exist at all and why does it change the way it does and not in another way?"<sup>53</sup> This is the crucial question. Through it, we discern what Husserl already in 1911 had called "the ultimate ontological problem" of creation, i.e., the central theme of the *Timaeus*.

In order to answer this question, however, Husserl first clarifies what it means for empirical objects to undergo constant change over time, and he

<sup>48</sup> *Timaeus* 27d-28a.

<sup>49</sup> Hua Mat IX: 196.

<sup>50</sup> Hua Mat IX: 196.

<sup>51</sup> Hua Mat IX: 197.

<sup>52</sup> Hua III/1: 8-9.

<sup>53</sup> Hua Mat IX: 197.

does so in relation to the being *par excellence* of the Forms. First, the existence of the empirical world, the fact that it is not a nothing, follows immediately from the fact that our statements about it, in spite of their subjectivity and vagueness, in Platonic terms, in spite of their doxastic nature, “*etwas von Wahrheit haben*.”<sup>54</sup> It is not the case that any predicate whatsoever can always describe any empirical objects in any situation with equal legitimacy. On the contrary, objects imperfectly instantiate predicates that, by virtue of a “purification” (*Reinigung*<sup>55</sup>), correspond to the Forms.<sup>56</sup> This quasi-objectivity of the world of *doxa*, of course, rests on the relation of participation, whereby particulars and their properties approximate corresponding ideal poles. Let us further notice that, in order to characterize the relation between the particulars and the Forms, Husserl only briefly evokes Plato’s view of participation as implying an “active role” on the side of the particulars,<sup>57</sup> and he does not even stress, as Plato sometimes does, that a particular tends (*βούλεται*),<sup>58</sup> aspires (*ὀρέγεται*),<sup>59</sup> or strives (*προθυμείται*)<sup>60</sup> to be like the corresponding ideal paradigm, while always remaining inferior to it. Rather, he focuses on the fact that the Forms, in spite of their being-in-itself, “descend to the empirical, ‘inhabit it,’ albeit imperfectly.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, he focuses on what Plato called *παρουσία* (presence)<sup>62</sup> of the forms causing the particular to resemble to them. The active role of the Forms stands out even more clearly in the explanation of empirical change, which requires the loss and acquisition of predicates and thus demands not only that new Forms always descend to the empirical domain and inhabit it, but also that they connect to one another, form “associations” that explain the emergence of particulars simultaneously instantiating a number of them. “Thus, the Forms have to move, have to act and act together [*wirken und zusammenwirken*], so that something like empirical being and empirical change can arise.”<sup>63</sup>

Even after acquiring the awareness that the existence and change of the empirical world requires “active,” “functioning” Forms, we are not yet able to explain why the world exists and why this particular world, along with its inner processes of change, exists. First, we need to answer another preliminary question. Granted that the Forms act, “How are we further to understand this

<sup>54</sup> Hua Mat IX: 197.

<sup>55</sup> Hua Mat IX: 197.

<sup>56</sup> This is what Plato, in the *Timaeus*, refers to the “having the same names.”

<sup>57</sup> “*Dadurch haben alle empirischen Dingen ‘Anteil’ an der Idee and ihrer Wahrheit*” (Hua Mat IX: 197).

<sup>58</sup> *Phaedo* 74d.

<sup>59</sup> *Phaedo* 75a and 75b.

<sup>60</sup> *Phaedo* 75b.

<sup>61</sup> Hua Mat IX: 197.

<sup>62</sup> *Phaedo*, 100d. The word *παρουσία* is here followed by *κοινωνία*, which conveys, instead, the idea of a symmetrical relation between forms and particulars.

<sup>63</sup> Hua Mat IX: 197.

activity of the Forms? How can it serve to explain empirical change? The answer is: this can only be understood in a teleological way.<sup>64</sup> As he does in 1911, Husserl here implicitly rules out that the function or activity of the forms can be understood after the model of natural causality, and for good reason, since natural causality belongs to the empirical world itself the existence and nature of which we are trying to account for. More generally, Husserl excludes any *efficient causation* on the part of the ideas, whether natural or supernatural. But this means that he adopts here the other cardinal model of explanation, viz., the one involving the correlated pair of motivating factors and motivated subjective acts. Indeed, in this reconstruction of the *Timaeus*, the very theme of subjectivity emerges for the first time in relation to Plato's theory of *Eros* as developed in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*.<sup>65</sup> It is the notion of love that leads us back to living subjectivity and to theoretical, axiological, and practical life as its essential dimensions. The Forms are objects of *love*, they are gazed upon in the particulars themselves, as their unreachable models. The value of a particular depends on the latter's proximity to the ideal, which is the ultimate object of love. Inevitably, the *axiological* level leads to the *practical* one:

Ist dann nicht die notwendige Konsequenz, dass der Schauende auch zum ethischen Subjekt im hohen und echten Sinne wird, dass er, wo und so weit es praktisch möglich ist, das Empirische den reinen Allgemeinheiten gemäß, diesen allgemeinen Idealen gemäß, zu gestalten sucht? Ist es da nicht ganz verständlich, wie ein Empirisches Eigenschaften der Idealität in wechselnder und in steigender Vollkommenheit annimmt?<sup>66</sup>

The will is motivated by the intellectual love for the Forms and is ethically motivated in the genuine sense. Accordingly, empirical reality becomes a field of practical activity under the guidance of ideal poles, an activity of reshaping and perfecting exerted by a subject motivated by such idealities. Within such a praxis, Husserl argues, the coming into existence of individuals approximating the Forms in different degrees becomes intelligible. This requires, as Husserl immediately adds, a subject who is not in the theoretical attitude, i.e., the attitude in which the Forms are "intended" as pure objectivities-in-themselves, objects of knowledge. In other words, this purely ontological-theoretical consideration of the Forms does not help us explain the existence of a ceaselessly changing empirical world. We need, instead, to connect the Forms with *loving* subjectivity, where "they act as living ideals, as principles of an evaluating and practical reason."<sup>67</sup> In this way, and only in this way, we

<sup>64</sup> Hua Mat IX: 197.

<sup>65</sup> Hua Mat IX: 197.

<sup>66</sup> Hua Mat IX: 197–198.

<sup>67</sup> Hua Mat IX: 198. No one familiar with Husserl's conception of intentionality will attribute to him the blunder of considering the Forms as immanent components of a subject's life. The "inclusion" in question here has the sense of a correlation.



can understand what it means for the Forms to act, and in what way they can account, *via* the practical life of the subjectivity they motivate, for the coming to be of an evolving empirical reality.

However, the simple model just evoked to account for the “ethical subject” molding the particulars under the guidance of ideal paradigms cannot serve our purpose, because it refers to a “mundane” practical subject, a human in the broad sense of the word. To clarify this important point, let us remark that, without mentioning them, Husserl here builds on the eidetic results established in the previous section of the *Einleitung in die Philosophie 1916–1920* entitled *Naturwissenschaftliche und Teleologische Welterklärung*, and that, according to the already mentioned terminology of 1911, belong to pure or formal teleology and theology. In that section, Husserl had already considered the situation of the practical subject in its *Umwelt*. It is a subject not just *de facto* motivated by its environment but also responsive to ethical norms and ultimately to the categorical imperative. Its environment not only *is* in such and such a way, it *should be* in such and such a way, and this defines the subject's responsibility. As Husserl says:

So ergibt sich und unter höchsten, absolut geltenden Prinzipien eine ethische Weltanschauung oder, wie wir auch sagen können, eine teleologische. Die menschliche Umwelt hat einen besonderen teleologischen Aspekt.<sup>68</sup>

The question Husserl asks at this point is the following: is this teleological aspect of the *Umwelt* sufficient to make sense of the idea of a teleological *worldview*? In particular, is it sufficient to reconstruct the teleological worldview presented in the *Timaeus*? This answer is no on both counts. It suffices to point out that the actions of human beings can influence only a very limited portion of the universe. Nature as a whole is totally “excluded from our human teleology.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, this is the case for any conceivable subjectivity belonging to the world, whose actions necessarily presuppose its existence and has a limited range of action. The human lover of forms, who acquires the status of a *genuinely ethical* subject and becomes the *good* and truly *responsible* architect of its *Umwelt*, is alive and active in the enlightened craftsmen, artists, pedagogues, rhetoricians, politicians, or nomothetes.<sup>70</sup> Yet, a universal teleology, such as is required if the very existence and structure of the *Werdenswelt*

<sup>68</sup> Hua Mat IX: 186.

<sup>69</sup> “*Sonnen und Sterne können wir nicht aus ihren Bahnen herausbewegen, die Vorgänge im Innersten der Erde können wir nicht praktisch umgestalten; und so bleiben Unendlichkeiten der Natur unserer menschlichen Teleologie verschlossen*” (Hua Mat IX: 187).

<sup>70</sup> Such a responsible ethical and political subject shaping the human environment according to genuine values requires what Husserl, in the *Vienna Lecture*, describes as a synthesis between the theoretical and the practical attitude, whereby the latter becomes free from the shackles of prejudice and tradition (Hua VI: 329).

is to be explained, prescribes that the entire universe be regarded as a practical field (“*praktischen Gutwert*”<sup>71</sup>) in which everything is determined in relation to a finality. Accordingly, we must envisage an “*übermenschliche Subjektivität*”<sup>72</sup> who would be the practical subject at the center of this infinite practical field of action, the source of the universal teleology.<sup>73</sup> No matter how different from a human subject it might be, we know *a priori* that this genuinely ethical divine subjectivity must obey the *a priori* norms that formal axiology and formal ethics prescribe to any evaluative and willing subjectivity.<sup>74</sup> Thus, at the purely *a priori* (or eidetic) level, these two results have already been achieved: (1) the intrinsic relation between a universal world teleology and a divine subject, and, thus, the necessary connection between universal teleology and theology, and (2) the dependence of universal teleology on the *a priori* laws of formal axiology and formal ethics.

Let us now see in what way Husserl’s rational reconstruction of Plato’s creation myth rests on these two eidetic results. First, Husserl quickly evokes point (1), thereby introducing the notion of the Demiurge.

Die Menschengenossen können natürlich nicht aufkommen für das Werden der Dingwelt. Sie wirken zwar mit ihren Zwecken in die Welt hinein, aber in eine schon vorgegebene. [...] Also der Einheit der Welt entsprechend und ihrer zeitlichen Endlosigkeit entsprechend, in der immer schon Gestaltetes und Prädikables da war, muss es eine Subjektivität sein, ein Demiurgos, die vorzeitlich, vorempirisch, vor allem Menschendasein (das auch empirisches Dasein ist) die Welt “geschaffen” hat. Das heißt: Als Urquelle aller Ideenbewegung, Ideenzusammenbildung zur Erwirkung von Empirischem fungierte ein überzeitliches teleologisches Prinzip für alles Zeitliche.<sup>75</sup>

This passage encodes the first of the aforementioned eidetic principles, which Husserl implicitly relies on to derive the necessity of a superhuman subject, the Demiurge, who, unlike a human being, can act as the teleological source of the “*Werdenswelt*” as such. It is a divine, supernatural subject for whom the empirical world *in its entire spatiotemporal form* is not pre-given. It is not a subject that exists as a fact in a world of facts.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, let us stress that, for Husserl, the cosmos of the *Timaeus* has “temporal infinity,” i.e., it has always existed: the creation is not a temporal beginning of the world that takes place “*vorzeitlich*.” As is well known, whether the world described in the *Timaeus* has a temporal beginning or is eternal, and consequently whether

<sup>71</sup> Hua Mat IX: 187.

<sup>72</sup> Hua Mat IX: 188.

<sup>73</sup> Hua Mat IX: 188.

<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Plato describes the Demiurge contemplating the ideal model as good (ἀγαθός), *Timaeus* 29a.

<sup>75</sup> Hua Mat. IX: 198.

<sup>76</sup> “*Ein Subjekt in der Welt ist ein irrationales Faktum*” (Hua Mat IX: 202).

Plato's creation myth should be intended literally or metaphorically, was already an object of controversy in the ancient world.<sup>77</sup> Husserl seems to opt for a non-literal interpretation, which, as we will see, makes Plato's myth even more significant for Husserl's own metaphysical investigations. Finally, as is likewise well known, neither Plato nor Greek thought in general upheld the view that the world has been created *ex nihilo*, this being the great difference with respect to the Judeo-Christian philosophical and theological tradition initiated by Philo from Alexandria. The Demiurge is not a creator *ex nihilo*. His activity is twofold. First, the Demiurge is the source of the aforementioned "movement and association of the Forms" required to explain the emergence of the *Werdenswelt*.<sup>78</sup> This kind of activity, however, takes place at the level of the Forms only. Most of all, the Demiurge is not the creator of the Forms in the way in which, according to Descartes, God is the creator of the "eternal truths." This is why, and this is the second aspect of its activity, the Demiurge, who does not create anything *ex nihilo*, acts on what Plato calls the *chora*, and Husserl, without ever using the term, characterizes as "a principle of irrationality, an irrational material for the spiritualization by means of active (*Zwecktätig*) Ideals, a material that is not ideal, and is capable only of relative idealization."<sup>79</sup> Thus, what the Demiurge's activity ultimately amounts to is, on the one hand, to combine the forms into a kind of blueprint of the world, and, on the other hand, to impart such a world-project on the *chora*, to the extent to which the latter can be idealized, i.e., it can be shaped into particulars that are inhabited by the Forms, and to the extent to which it can be "spiritualized" in the sense that it can receive a teleological sense in relation to the axiological structure of the Forms.

Husserl's following considerations concerning the internal teleological structure of the realm of Forms, instead, can be read as corresponding to the second of his previously mentioned eidetic insights. Let us remember that, according to Husserl, in spite of its mythical character, the creation myth of the *Timaeus* contains the first teleological worldview grounded in the *a priori*. In particular, what is in question is the *a priori*, internal axiological structure culminating in the Form of the Good, as the "pure idea of an absolutely perfect being in general" and the "highest conceivable teleological ideal"<sup>80</sup> with respect to which all other values are means to an end. We have, thus, a supreme axiological principle, i.e., the perfect being, and a realm of Forms subordinate

<sup>77</sup> A classic work on the ancient interpretations of the *Timaeus* up until Proclus is Baltes 1976–1978.

<sup>78</sup> Husserl cannot have in mind, here, the *κοινωνία* among the five great kinds that Plato describes in the *Sophist* (251a–259e), which cannot be the result of the Demiurge's activity. Rather, he is thinking of the contingent association among the forms that are simultaneously "present" in the particulars.

<sup>79</sup> Hua Mat. IX: 198.

<sup>80</sup> Hua Mat IX: 199.

to it and structured according to formal-axiological principles. Correlated to such an ideal teleological structure, there is the highest practical subject.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, we face a dualism between the highest subject who “creates” the world by contemplating the Forms and, ultimately, the Form of the good, and this Form itself as the highest being, what exists in the true and eminent sense. On the one hand, a divine practical subject; on the other, a supreme axiological principle—each supernatural in their own way. In conclusion:

Also das im wahren Sinne Seiende, das an sich und streng Seiende, ist die “Idee des Guten” als das lebendige, im zeitlos-ewigen Schauen geschaute Ideal des Demiurgos. Dieses Ideal aller Ideale ist als erschaut zugleich die unendlich wirkende Sonne; das absolute Sollen der höchsten Norm ist die Wirkungskraft des Seins, das als empirisches Sein ausschließlich um seiner möglichsten Güte und Schönheit ist, im Einzelnen und im Weltganzen. Dieses ist natürlich keine Summe, sondern eine Harmonie, Einheit eines schönsten und besten Kosmos, des bestmöglichen, des der Idee des Guten bestangenäherten. Jedes Ding ist um seines Wertes willen und fungiert als Mittel für höhere Zwecke; alle Kausalität ist letztlich teleologische Kausalität, jedes Warum besagt soviel wie Wozu.<sup>82</sup>

After outlining the “creation” of the universe on the basis of the intelligible model, and thanks to the irrational element of the *chora*, Husserl’s reconstruction ends. Given that his aim was only to extract the main ever-lasting philosophical motives underlying the *Timaeus*, he leaves out the different and very detailed stages of Plato’s creation myth. In this culminating and final passage, instead, Husserl, faithful to the overarching theme of these lectures, portrays Plato’s teleological worldview in a way that implicitly foregrounds its stark contrast with atomistic cosmology. The latter is through and through ateleological and causal-naturalistic. Being coincides with atoms. The only “effective force of being” (*Wirkungskraft des Seins*) is the collision of atoms moving in empty space. This explains all change in the world, including the functions of the soul and individual and collective human behavior. In phenomenological terms, the specificity of the ontological region “spirit,” with its teleological/motivational internal form of “causality,” is completely ignored. The very ideal of a “moral conduct” inspired by intrinsically good aims loses its sense.<sup>83</sup> There is no teleology, no moral (or immoral) conduct *within* the world; likewise, there is no teleological-moral consideration *of* the world. Accordingly, no investigation is possible about the “reason why” a world in general, and this world in particular, exists. The world itself does not arise by virtue of any

<sup>81</sup> Hua Mat IX: 199.

<sup>82</sup> Hua Mat IX: 199, my emphasis.

<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Husserl reproaches Democritus, who also developed an ethics, for his deterministic worldview which undermines all moral notions from the outset (Hua Mat IX: 193).

“*Wirkungskraft des Seins*”: as a whole, it remains a blind infinite fact. Plato’s teleological worldview appears indeed as the mirror image of atomistic cosmology. (1) Being in the highest and ultimate sense is non-physical, non-worldly, it is the Form of the good. (2) Such supreme being is the Ideal “timelessly-eternally” beheld (in a *sui generis* intentional act) by the divine subject. (3) By virtue of this contemplation (or, more specifically, of the love that it arouses), the Form of the good *acts*, i.e., it motivates as a norm the moral action of the Demiurge. Thus, the absolute “*Sollen*” of the highest norm is Plato’s ethical-teleological “*Wirkungskraft des Seins*.” (4) Consequently, the Demiurge is motivated to shape the best of all possible worlds after the model offered by the Form of the good, and *the world itself is a moral accomplishment demanded by the ideals of practical reason*. As Husserl maintained, and, once more, against any form of naturalism, “*the highest truth is the ethical.*”<sup>84</sup> (5) Empirical being itself (both at the level of individual things and at the level of the entire cosmos) is through and through permeated, via the action of the Demiurge, by this ethical/teleological “*Wirkungskraft*” by virtue of which it exists for the sake of the ultimate goodness and beauty. (6) Finally, the unity of the cosmos is, so to speak, “practical,” i.e., spelt out in terms of means and ends: each thing is a means to higher ends. Thus, all causality becomes teleological: such is the conclusion of Plato’s teleological *worldview*.<sup>85</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion: the Difficult Path from Plato’s Creation Myth to Husserl’s Project of a Teleological Science of the World

As Husserl adds in the *coda* of his short commentary, even if in Plato’s time a real science of nature had existed, he would have still deemed it necessary to go beyond it to seek a teleological/spiritual understanding of the world, rather than accepting that the world is “*unverständlich*” and, thus, senseless.<sup>86</sup> This claim leads us to our concluding remarks. As we have seen, teleological

<sup>84</sup> Hua Mat IX: 186.

<sup>85</sup> The reader acquainted with Plato’s text will find it surprising that Husserl does not mention Plato’s doctrine of the two types of causes (intelligence and necessity) and their cooperation thanks to the Demiurge’s activity of “persuasion” of the necessary causes (*Timaeus* 48a; on this problem, see Morrow 1950). Indeed, Plato himself seems to have taken into account natural causality more than Husserl seems to be aware of. Plato’s lack of interest for natural science too has been the object of scholarly controversy (see Lloyd 1968). Likewise questionable, to say the least, is Husserl’s following claim (Hua Mat IX: 199) that Plato did not sharply distinguish the Demiurge from the Form of the good (on this problem, see Gilson 2002; Menn 1992 and 1995). The latter claim is partly due to the influence of Plato’s scholarship at the time Husserl is writing, partly to his constant preoccupation to establish relations with his own theological reflections. Indeed, as we have seen, Husserl had identified the Form of good with God already by 1911.

<sup>86</sup> Hua Mat IX: 200.

motives are present in Western philosophy from its very beginning. In this history, Plato stands between the early attempts to include teleological, still quasi-mythological motives in the first cosmologies, and Aristotle's first sketch of a teleological science of the world,<sup>87</sup> followed by the "mystical system of Neoplatonism" and the Medieval metaphysical systems.<sup>88</sup> Now, if we put side by side Husserl's different claims about Plato, we might sense a tension among them. Plato was (1) the inventor of the ideal of genuine philosophy and of the doctrine of the principles, in short, the inventor of the ideal of scientificity; (2) the first philosopher to have self-consciously regarded the teleological worldview as *a demand of reason itself*<sup>89</sup>; (3) the creator of a teleological worldview in a *mythical form*. How is (3) to be reconciled with (1) and (2)? How is Plato's role in the vicissitudes of teleology to be assessed? Husserl's reconstruction of the *Timaeus* suggests a possible answer: Plato's mythological teleology is not in contradiction with his discovery of the ideal of scientificity; on the contrary, it is its coherent consequence. Because Plato was so acutely aware of the difference between genuine science and unrigorous, naïve philosophical discourse, and because, in addition, he was convinced that only the Forms can be objects of genuine science, then resorting to a mythological, natural teleology becomes, however odd this might sound, a coherent consequence of his idealistic ontology *cum* "*Wissenschaftslehre*," a demand of Plato's "metaphysical" *critique* of reason. Accordingly, for him, it was out of the question to venture into quasi-scientific/quasi-mythological investigations after the style of the Presocratics, who were not yet thinking under the guidance of the *critical* ideal of scientificity.

The subsequent history of the notion of teleology, which Husserl reconstructs in the remaining part of the *Einleitung in die Philosophie 1916–1920* up to the conflict between Spinoza and Leibniz,<sup>90</sup> would, of course, deserve a separate study. What can be briefly mentioned, however, is that its overall purpose is to highlight that modern philosophy too is marked by the systematic failure to achieve a peaceful cohabitation between a causal explanation and a teleological account of the world, and that this failure is due to the impossibility to overcome its *objectivistic presuppositions*. It is Husserl's contention that such a cohabitation was made possible for the first time by the critique of reason developed by transcendental phenomenology.<sup>91</sup> It alone can demythologize not only the self-avowed recourse to mythology of the wise Plato, but also the hidden mythological residue of all modern philosophy and science, and disclose the domain of metaphysics as the teleological science of the world. This is why phenomenology is called to overcome the opposition

<sup>87</sup> Hua Mat IX: 210.

<sup>88</sup> Hua Mat IX: 209.

<sup>89</sup> See *Phaedo* 96a–99c for a famous and explicit programmatic statement.

<sup>90</sup> Hua Mat IX: 424–467.

<sup>91</sup> Hua Mat IX: 208.

between the causal and teleological worldview,<sup>92</sup> which means that, without interfering with the causal explanation of the modern science of nature, it establishes the possibility of a comprehensive teleological understanding of the world. This is because such an understanding is grounded in the dimension of transcendental facticity:

Die Zurückführung alles Seins auf die transzendente Subjektivität und ihre konstitutiven intentionalen Leistungen lässt, um noch eins zu erwähnen, keine andere als eine teleologische Weltbetrachtung offen.<sup>93</sup>

Admittedly, Husserl never developed this teleological-theological worldview. He only left programmatic statements and incomplete investigations, which, as already mentioned, are objects of considerable controversy. In this case, the difficult path from myth to science has never been completely charted. Yet, Husserl's indications as to how to formulate a teleological-theological worldview founded in transcendental phenomenology are not only extremely interesting *per se*, they also lend themselves to comparisons with Plato's creation myth, which can show to what extent Husserl was trying to transmute myth into science, vindicating the intuitive, almost prophetic value of the former. The fundamental elements of Plato's creation myth are the Demiurge as the necessarily non-worldly principle of a universal teleology; the realm of Forms culminating in the Form of the Good, which accounts both for the intelligibility and for the teleological meaningfulness of the world; and, finally, the *chora*, i.e., the non-ideal principle of irrationality on which the Demiurge operates. Now, for Husserl, the problem of creation, just as all ethical-religious problems, can only be meaningfully addressed within the factual monadic sphere.<sup>94</sup> The divine activity that "creates" the world now takes the form of a universal life acting through all absolute, individual, subjective life, a universal will-to-good that accounts for the harmonious course of the intentional life of transcendental intersubjectivity, on which the relative being of the world rests.<sup>95</sup> Husserl's Demiurge is this creative will-to-good. The necessarily non-worldly source of universal teleology, which in Plato's myth was mythical/supernatural, now lives in the depths of transcendental life. The dualism between the Demiurge and the Form of the good gives way to a dynamic conception of God, which is the supreme value, the good itself as the entelechy of the monadic totality,<sup>96</sup> and which at the same time constantly realizes itself

<sup>92</sup> Hua IX: 300.

<sup>93</sup> Hua IX: 301.

<sup>94</sup> Hua I: 182.

<sup>95</sup> Hua XLII: 168.

<sup>96</sup> Hua XV: 610.

in the activities of its own universal will-to-good.<sup>97</sup> It is now clear to what extent the metaphorical interpretation of the *Timaeus* that Husserl endorses resonates with his own conception of a continuous creation, which takes place in the immanent time of transcendental life. We also appreciate, though, that, in contrast to what happens in the *Timaeus*, this continuous creation sustains an essentially historical transcendental life, which endlessly develops towards the realization of higher and higher values. Finally, Husserl too has his *chora*, the *hyle* that he himself considered enigmatic within this account of creation, due to the difficulty of explaining it in teleological terms.<sup>98</sup>

These correspondences between the *Timaeus* and Husserl's own theological views highlight the fact that, according to Husserl, Plato's creation myth could only be replaced by a scientific *logos* by overcoming the objectivism of Plato's philosophy. Such is, at bottom, the sense of Husserl's *Timaeus*.

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<sup>97</sup> "Gott als Wille zum Guten ist letzte Wirklichkeit, erhält letzte Realisation, wenn eben das Gute ist" (Hua XLII: 68).

<sup>98</sup> Hua XXVIII: 226, Hua XLII: 176.



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