The Republic, considered by many to be Plato’s magnum opus, is “Plato’s most comprehensive dialogue.”\(^1\) In its ten books, Plato goes through questions of justice, the good life, what is intelligible, and even what is truly real. Central to the work as a whole is the theory of metaphysics, delivered brilliantly in Book VII through the illustrious “Allegory of the Cave.” Eva Brann asks rhetorically, “Who has spent a lifetime reading Plato’s writings and does not regard the Republic as his central work?”\(^2\) This, however, is the exact assumption I set out to explore: was the Republic indeed Plato’s central work, or did his opinions change about his most important theories with time?

In Raphael’s fresco The School of Athens, we see the two titans of Greek Philosophy at the center, conversing, each holding one of his own philosophic works. Aristotle is holding the Nichomachean Ethics, but Plato is not holding his magnus opus, the Republic. Instead

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he holds the Timaeus. Raphael’s philosophic opinions of Plato are irrelevant, but his choice does underline an important debate over the relationship between the theories proposed in the Republic and the Timaeus. Does the Timaeus supersede the Republic as the defining work of Platonic metaphysics? And if the central doctrine of the Republic is called into question, what does that mean for the rest of its teachings?

To begin any discussion on the relationship between the Republic and the Timaeus one must inevitably consider when the two works were produced, or at least what order the two were written in. If one is to make the claim that the Timaeus is in some way a completion or emendation of the Republic, the Republic must precede the Timaeus. For a classical source of the order of Plato’s dialogues we can turn to Diogenes Laertius’ Lives of Eminent Philosophers. He divides Plato’s dialogues into nine tetralogies (τετραλογίαι), if the Republic and Laws are each counted as a single dialogue (3.56-61). The eighth of these tetralogies contains the Clitophon, the Republic, the Timaeus, and the Critias. This ordering is convenient for the interpretation that the Timaeus surpasses the Republic, as it not only comes after the Republic, but directly after, as if Plato, upon completion of the Republic, was wholly
unsatisfied and decided to write the Timaeus to compensate for the Republic’s inadequacies. Diogenes tells us that, even in his day, the ordering of the dialogues was not settled, and that there were many different orderings. He tells us that Aristophanes the Grammarian and others grouped Plato’s dialogues into trilogies, claiming the first to contain the Republic, the Timaeus, and the Critias (3.61-2), a different order, but the Timaeus was still directly after the Republic.

The problem of this chronology has by no means been settled, as scholars today continue to debate the ordering of Plato’s dialogues. To give an exhaustive account of all the various chronologies and the reasons for said chronologies would be a paper in itself, so I will instead suffice to give only the opinions of A. E. Taylor, who asserts that the Timaeus followed the Republic, and Gilbert Ryle, who asserts that the Timaeus anteceded the Republic. For this debate, the account Socrates gives at the beginning of the Timaeus begins with a recap of the discussion Socrates and his interlocutors had the day before. What Socrates proceeds to recount is the material contained in books II-V of the Republic, ending right before the heart of the Republic begins. Not only does Socrates end here, but he even asks Timaeus if he forgot
anything, to which Timaeus assures Socrates that he successfully remembered everything from the day before (19a-b). If the discussion of the day before were indeed the Republic, why would all its most important parts be omitted? If it wasn’t, then what could Socrates be recalling that is so similar to it?

Taylor argues that the summary of part of the Republic points to the Timaeus coming after the Republic.³ He does, however, consent to the possibility that the absence of important doctrines in the Republic could mean that there were additions to the Republic after the completion of the Timaeus, although he regards this theory as “groundless speculations.”⁴ Nevertheless, such a possibility does not deter Taylor from his assertion of the relative orders, as he puts more faith in the style of the Timaeus for its relative date than references to previous works.⁵ He places in one group the Sophist, Politicus, Timaeus, Philebus, and Laws because of their stylistic divergence from other dialogues, giving four examples. The first is that these dialogues are far less dramatic. The second is that, aside from the Philebus, Socrates is not the

⁴ Taylor (1928) 3-4.
⁵ Taylor (1928) 4.
main speaker (or is not present at all as in the Laws). The third is that these dialogues take place in more of a “lecture” format where the lecturer has a definite goal, and the fourth example is that Plato uses a distinct “periodic” style, which he owed to Isocrates.6

All this evidence seems to suggest that these five dialogues were all written together, but it does not prove that these dialogues came after the Republic. To come to this conclusion Taylor makes two assumptions: that the Laws was the last dialogue of this group and that it was published later than Plato’s other dialogues. The first assumption he defends by claiming that the four stylistic eccentricities mentioned above are most prevalent in the Laws. The second he defends by claiming that the Laws makes references to Plato’s old age, and he relies upon ancient sources which attest to its publication after Plato’s death.

Gilbert Ryle unequivocally rejects this interpretation, saying very succinctly, “This is an error.”7 Ryle’s conclusion is what Taylor referred to as “groundless speculations” (i.e. that the summary given by Plato of the day before was not the Republic as we have it, but an

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6 Taylor (1928) 4.  
“earlier version of one section of it,”8 what he calls “The Ideal State or the Proto-Republic”9). To prove his case Ryle gives five reasons for why the discussion, which took place the day before the Timaeus, could not have been the Republic.10 His first piece of evidence is that none of the characters of the Republic (with the exception of Socrates) are present during the Timaeus, and none of the characters of the Timaeus (again excepting Socrates) are present during the Republic.11 Next he claims that it is “pretty clear” that Socrates gave a monologue the day before the Timaeus, whereas the Republic was a dialogue, but no passages are mentioned to support this. Thirdly he argues that the Republic as we know it could not have been presented in “one session of a few hours,” but the doctrines from books II-V (which is all Socrates mentions in his

9 Ryle (1966) 231.
11 Dorter deals with this argument pointing out that the Republic is “a monologue without a dramatic frame” (Dorter, The Transformation of Plato’s Republic, 352). Because of this, the Republic could have been narrated to Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates, or anyone for that matter. This argues against the following point Ryle makes as well, as Dorter asserts that the Republic is a monologue, whereas Ryle claims it is a dialogue. Finally Ryle’s fourth point is called into question, since there would be no need for the instructions to Timaeus and the others to be incorporated into the Republic, as it was merely a lecture and not the discourse between Socrates and his guests. N.B. Dorter subscribes to Taylor’s view that the Timaeus follows the Republic.
summary) could have been given in such a span of time. His penultimate argument is that Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates were instructed by Socrates the previous day to repay him for his lecture, instructions which are never issued in the Republic. Lastly Ryle makes the point that Socrates, had he presented the Republic the day before, could not help but discuss justice, the main argument of the Republic, not to mention that Homer and the other poets are never mentioned. Ryle also claims that the Timaeus cannot be proven as a late work through stylistic similarity to the Laws, since he denies that the Laws was a late dialogue at all. In his chronology, the Laws had already been written eight or nine years before Plato’s death, and it was merely going through revision when Plato died.

For those who accept the Timaeus as following the Republic, the question of Socrates’ summary in the Timaeus becomes problematic. If Plato had completed the Republic as we know it today, why would he so clearly reference it, yet leave out the most important of its teachings? Here I will not restrict myself, and will give all

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12 While Ryle’s reasoning is in and of itself wholly unconvincing, he continues from here to argue that the Critias in fact preceded the Timaeus, which makes me regard his theories with even more suspicion.
the major opinions and reasoning I can find for why Plato would start the Timaeus in such an odd fashion.

I will begin with the views of W. K. C. Guthrie. Guthrie finds it particularly odd that Socrates should want to see his state in action,\textsuperscript{14} when he quite clearly says the day before that he need not prove such a state could exist (Republic 5.472c-e). Socrates later even claims that it doesn’t matter whether this state ever exists, and that it is merely a model for men to follow (Republic 9.592a-b). The image of Socrates in the Timaeus as an “impractical theorist”\textsuperscript{15} also seems to undermine completely the goal of the Republic. To Guthrie this shows that later in his career Plato became more pragmatic and “veered from an idealistic view of society towards practical policy.”\textsuperscript{16}

Far stranger than Plato’s seeming pragmatism, however, is the complete absence of any Platonic doctrines on metaphysics, the most important part of the Republic. While Ryle, because of this fact, refused to believe that the Republic could have preceded the Timaeus, many others have labored to see if there is some message Plato was

\textsuperscript{15} Guthrie (1978) 245.
\textsuperscript{16} Guthrie (1978) 245.
trying to get across. This absence, provided that the Timaeus was indeed written after the Republic, cannot have been a mistake on Plato’s part, and it is far too jarring for anyone who has read the Republic for Plato to think it would escape the notice of the reader. It cannot be a matter of disagreement that this blatant omission means something, but what this hidden message is has not been settled. A break-through theory on Plato’s metaphysics was proposed by Henry Jackson, who, in a series of articles entitled Plato’s Later Theory of Ideas, proposed that Plato’s theory of metaphysics changed in his later dialogues (the Parmenides, Philebus, Theaetetus, Sophist, Politicus, and Timaeus).\(^{17}\) For his argument he divided Plato’s works into five categories. For simplicity’s sake, I will only discuss the third and fourth, the third containing the Republic, Phaedo, and Cratylus, the fourth the later dialogues just mentioned. Jackson saw the fourth group as a process in which Plato deconstructed his earlier theory through the Parmenides and Philebus, and laid the groundwork for a new theory through the Timaeus, the last work of this group.

According to Jackson, when the Timaeus was written Plato no longer believed in “other Ideas, the metaphysical, mathematical, moral and aesthetic Ideas” such as he had proposed in earlier dialogues.\textsuperscript{18} In this later theory Jackson claims that only the Forms “of animal types and of the four elements were recognized,”\textsuperscript{19} and not the Forms of “objects of science, of negations, of perishable things and so on.”\textsuperscript{20} In the third group of dialogues, the Forms did exist in a “rudimentary” way, but it embraced everything that had “plurality.”\textsuperscript{21} Plato maintains the fundamentals of his argument, still believing in the Forms as “eternal, immutable, perfect, which really exist, and are objects of knowledge,”\textsuperscript{22} but he prunes these Forms from being of everything to only being of some things. Jackson further claims that in his earlier writings, Plato puts forth the doctrine that manifestations of the Forms “partake” in their respective Forms, but this doctrine is called into question in the Parmenides and is never mentioned in the Timaeus.\textsuperscript{23} Jackson’s explanation is that this doctrine is replaced in the fourth group of dialogues by Plato’s new

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\item Sweeney (1975) 192, quoted from Jackson.
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\item Taylor (1928) 27-8.
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theory. In this new metaphysical doctrine, things with becoming do not “partake” of, but rather “imitate” the Forms while remaining separate.\textsuperscript{24}

While some, such as R. D. Archer-Hind, enthusiastically took up this theory, not everyone was convinced. Paul Shorey confronts the views of Archer-Hind’s introduction to the Timaeus and raises two objections on Plato’s supposed new theory. The first is quite simply that Plato did not change his mind, but rather expounded more fully upon a doctrine that never changed.\textsuperscript{25} Shorey also does not view Plato from a purely metaphysical perspective, which is what he accuses Archer-Hind of doing.\textsuperscript{26} While he admits that metaphysics is an important aspect to Platonic philosophy, a “sounder interpretation” is found instead in looking at Plato through his psychology, his literary style, his historical setting, and his opinions on society, morality, and religion.\textsuperscript{27} Archer-Hind, because of his neglect of these fields of study, is accused of a too “rigid” view on Plato’s metaphysics.

\textsuperscript{24} Taylor (1928) 28.
\textsuperscript{26} Shorey (1888) 278.
\textsuperscript{27} Shorey (1888) 278.
which is preoccupied merely with proving that Plato never contradicts himself.\textsuperscript{28}

To refute Jackson’s (and subsequently Archer-Hind’s) theory Shorey calls into question Jackson’s interpretation of the Philebus, as a great deal of Jackson’s theory lies upon the interpretation of the Philebus more as a work on metaphysics than on ethics.\textsuperscript{29} Shorey rejects this view and instead argues that the Philebus is meant to make logic as independent from metaphysics as possible.\textsuperscript{30} He further accuses Jackson and Archer-Hind, in asking for “complete metaphysical consistency,” of asking Plato for the impossible.\textsuperscript{31} Another important dialogue for Jackson’s view is the Parmenides, which Jackson sees as a refutation of Plato’s old theory and the introduction of the idea of the Forms as models, which is not subject to Parmenides’ challenge.\textsuperscript{32} Shorey remains unconvinced, and retorts that this is not at all supported by the text. Socrates does not reject the idea of partnership in the form; he merely says it would be a difficult task to prove it (Parmenides 129d-e). Shorey also denies that the dialogue comes to a definite

\textsuperscript{28} Shorey (1888) 279.
\textsuperscript{29} Shorey (1888) 280.
\textsuperscript{30} Shorey (1888) 280.
\textsuperscript{31} Shorey (1888) 281.
\textsuperscript{32} Shorey (1888) 286.
conclusion on the questions raised, as Jackson sees in a
new theory.  

Taylor as well rejects Jackson’s theory, agreeing
with Shorey that the theory of imitation was only a
proposition and was not meant to replace an old theory of
participation. Taylor also points out that the Academy
continued to use the vocabulary of participation “down to
the very last age of Greek Neo-Platonism.”34 This,
however, does not mean that Taylor subscribed to a
constant Platonic doctrine of metaphysics throughout the
course of Plato’s dialogues. In fact, Taylor claims that Plato
never wrote his own views on metaphysics, but only
delivered them in lecture at the Academy.35 The
metaphysics proposed in the Republic and Phaedo Taylor
ascribes to Socrates and denies them as uniquely Platonic.36
Nor does Taylor see much difference between the
metaphysics of the Timaeus and the Phaedo, only the
strictly verbal difference of participation and imitation.37

Taylor offers a possible explanation for the
infamous omissions of the introduction to the Timaeus in

33 Shorey (1888) 286.
34 Taylor (1928) 30.
35 Taylor (1928) 32.
36 Taylor (1928) 32.
37 Taylor (1928) 33.
that the scientific doctrines of the Republic were no longer sufficient and needed to be amended.\textsuperscript{38} To Taylor, a large portion of the Timaeus is a work on mathematical physics instead of metaphysics.\textsuperscript{39} But if one, disappointed at the absence of Platonic metaphysics, wishes to be enlightened on Platonic scientific doctrines, then he is twice fooled, as Taylor relegates the Timaeus to a mere restatement of 5\textsuperscript{th} century Pythagorean teachings.\textsuperscript{40} Taylor’s personal opinion of the recapitulation is that it has nothing to do with the Timaeus at all. Rather, it is an introduction to the Critias, and all that was necessary as an introduction to the ancient Athenians’ defeat of the Atlanteans was the Republic up to Book V, which is the level of civilization the Athenians at that time had reached.\textsuperscript{41}

Cornford, the last scholar I will discuss, goes against Taylor’s view of the Timaeus’ Pythagoreanism. He points out that Timaeus, in his discourse, never appeals to any authorities, and while undoubtedly he draws from Pythagoras, he draws from all the note-worthy pre-

\textsuperscript{38} Taylor (1928) 33.
\textsuperscript{39} Taylor (1928) 33.
\textsuperscript{40} Taylor (1928) 11.
\textsuperscript{41} Taylor (1928) 33-4.
Socrates as well as contemporaries. He also denies that the Timaeus is in any way connected to the Republic. Just as with Ryle, Cornford is convinced that the omission of so many key points from the Republic must mean that the discussion the day before the Timaeus was not the Republic. To Cornford, if Plato had wanted the Republic to take place the day before the Timaeus, there would have been no need for a summary, and the stage for the encounter would have been set in the Republic, not the Timaeus. Cornford also claims that two days before the Timaeus could not have been the feast of Bendis, which is the dramatic date of the Republic. Cornford’s view is that Socrates could have discussed his state on multiple occasions, and that the day before the Timaeus was one such occasion, although a good deal had been left unsaid. The conclusion Cornford comes to is that dramatically the Republic and Timaeus do not take place in the span of two days, and the Timaeus was not supposed to replace or

43 Unlike Ryle, however, Cornford does place the Timaeus chronologically after the *Republic*, and places the Timaeus among Plato’s later dialogues. Cornford also rejects Ryle’s idea of a *Proto-Republic*. Cornford, 1, 5
44 Cornford (1948) 4.
45 Cornford (1948) 4.
46 Cornford (1948) 4-5.
47 Cornford (1948) 4.
correct anything in the Republic.⁴⁸ The introduction, while not a summary of the Republic, was meant to invoke the memory of the Republic, in order to “link the morality externalized in the ideal society to the organization of the world.”⁴⁹ Therefore the Timaeus, while not affecting or being affected by the Republic, is merely supposed to be seen in the same light as the Republic. The Republic focused on the “structural analogy between the state and the individual soul,” whereas the Timaeus demonstrates both of these as coming from the order of the cosmos.⁵⁰

Having spent so much time and effort discussing the views of others on the question of the Republic and Timaeus, I feel compelled to give my own views. I must first, however, confess that I am hardly an unbiased judge. Plato’s earlier dialogues have profoundly impacted both my beliefs and my personal conduct, so I will of course respond in a hostile manner to any attempt to undermine their authority. That being said, I generally subscribe to the view that the truth is found between extremes. I see this disposition as a good way to consider the difficult question

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⁴⁸ Cornford (1948) 5.
⁴⁹ Cornford (1948) 6.
⁵⁰ Cornford (1948) 6.
at hand. In the case at hand the two extremes would be Jackson’s theory that the Republic and Timaeus propose two distinct ideas of metaphysics, and Cornford’s theory that the two dialogues have nothing to do with one another. Therefore I would align myself more with Shorey, since his view allows for a more consistent interpretation of Plato’s philosophy, but at the same time allows for the natural development of ideas over time.

I also feel I should at least propose my own idea for Plato’s unsettling opening to the Timaeus. I find Cornford’s point that the natural order of the Timaeus is the basis for both the individual and the state expounded upon in the Republic. For this reason, I see the Timaeus as though it were a new beginning to the Republic, a prequel rather than a sequel. The main points of the Republic could not be mentioned in the Timaeus, as they naturally come after the subject of the Timaeus (i.e. the creation of the world). It is not until the world has been established that we can contemplate the things that follow from it, which are the subjects of the Republic. These are, of course, merely the opinions of one who knows far less about Plato than any of the scholars mentioned prior and are pure conjecture. Nonetheless, I hope that this paper gives a good preview to
the various interpretations of the Republic and Timaeus for any who wish to contemplate this question themselves.
Bibliography


