**Persuading Necessity and Recognizing the Mean in the *Timaeus***

In the *Timaeus* Plato conceives of the universe as the offspring of reason and necessity. Reason is said to have prevailed over necessity subjecting it to wise persuasion (48a). I will begin with a brief discussion of what Plato means by reason’s persuasion of necessity at the cosmic level and will then focus on exploring what this means in the context of our individual lives: How can we explain the ethical dimension of our lives in terms of reason’s persuasion of necessity? I will then move to the more applied questions: How can we translate this theory into practice? Does the *Timaeus* provide resources for understanding how we can know best why in one context we ought to work on persuading one aspect of necessity over another?

Timaeus proposes a model of reality in four terms: the Demiurge, the forms, the particulars, and the Receptacle. If the forms stand as marks of order and determination, the Receptacle at the other end represents absence of order (50d-e). Order here does not mean simple mechanical cause-effect regularity, for in that sense the Receptacle also exhibits ‘order’ to the extent that already at the pre-cosmic stage the movements of its component powers are regulated by the law of ‘like to like’ (52e, 53a). Rather, the kind of order that the intelligible realm exhibits and the Receptacle utterly lacks has an intrinsically valuable aspect, since it presupposes inherent measure, beauty, proportion, and therefore goodness.¹
Timaeus offers an explanation of the universe on account of a blend of reason and necessity. The Demiurge and the forms are associated with reason, while the Receptacle is associated with necessity. The formal necessity of ground and consequent manifest between intelligible forms is fully rational. The Receptacle’s necessity however combines the regularity of the ‘like to like’, which describes movement at the pre-cosmic stage (53a), with randomness and chance (46e). The Receptacle contains several regular cause-effect series, but the random way in which such series intersect or connect among themselves in the absence of intelligent design is governed by chance. Viewed in themselves, independently of reason, the mechanical cause-effect series active in the Receptacle wander aimlessly; insofar as some of these series lend themselves to the purposeful use of reason, they become goal-directed auxiliary causes, no longer aimless, wandering causes.

Auxiliary causes (sunaitiai, 46d) are regular cause-effect series that have been made to work positively and purposively for a rational aim. In Timaeus’ illustration, contractions and dilations of our eyes are auxiliary causes for the supreme benefit to be gained through sight, namely philosophical inquiry into the nature of the universe (47b). Talk about persuaded and unpersuaded necessity is relative to the context. The fact that one causal line cannot be persuaded to work as auxiliary cause for one particular effect does not mean that it is unpersuadable to work so for another within the web of causes that together aim at the Good. There are also presumably some causal lines that could never in principle be made to work for the Good, e.g., the line that leads from ignorance of one’s own ignorance to vice. Divine craftsmanship consists in the Demiurge’s ability to discern
between persuadable and unpersuadable causal series, to choose each time among the persuadable ones the specific set that is most conducive to maximization of order, balance, and proportion, and to combine such series most efficiently for the desired end. That necessity is to be persuaded (as opposed to being constrained by force) implies that it is to be made to somehow willingly comply with reason and manifest its own nature in a way that converges with reason’s design (56c).\(^4\) By persuading necessary cause-effect sequences reason is not making them behave in a way that is contrary to their nature, i.e., changing their direction or making them fail to manifest their sequence. Rather, reason discerns among possible combinations of causal lines the ones that are most conducive to maximum benefit overall and works on assembling causal lines in such combinations. Thus, when depicting the creation of our mortal bodies by the lesser gods, Timaeus explains that flesh is designed for protection of the body against cold or injuries generally, yet some of the necessary implications of flesh are that it impedes flexibility of the bodily joints and that it causes insensitivity (74e-75c). These implications no god can challenge or change. Given these conditions, the lower gods are confronted with the choice between cognitive sensitivity and protection ensuring longevity. They opt for the former.

The overarching suggestion of the *Timaeus* is that human life reflects the order and arrangement of the universe at a microcosmic level. Correspondingly, we are to imitate the Demiurge and persuade necessity in our lives (47b-c, 7c, 90a, 90c, 90d).\(^5\) The Demiurge’s work in organizing the external chaos is to be mirrored in our own effort to order the internal chaos of our sensations, emotions, and desires, which have become a
necessary part of us through embodiment (42a-c). The distinction between virtuous and non-virtuous individuals can be interpreted in terms of the degree to which necessity is persuaded or not to follow rational guidance in an individual’s life. The more we transform necessary elements into auxiliary causes working towards the Good, the better we are. And the more we allow necessity to wander aimlessly in our lives the more we border on mediocrity or vice. The fact that pain is depletion and pleasure replenishment or that anger is the boiling of the blood (70b) fall outside of our power of control and persuasion. Yet the choice to get angry at some things and not at others, the attempts to train and habituate ourselves in enjoying some pleasures over others and even to endure some pains over enjoying pleasures fall within our reason’s ability to persuade necessity in us. Similarly, it is not up to us to choose to feel subliminal disturbances or replenishments, but it is up to us to work on increasing our sensitivity to some pleasures, and thus to turn some of the previously subliminal reactions into intensified, conscious experiences. Education, life under a good political government, exposure to good public and private speeches are helpful instruments in this attempt (87b).

How are we to translate this into practice? How can we know which necessary aspects are persuadable and which are not or where to start in persuading them? As complex beings, we are at any given time the centre of convergence for several causal lines. As a result, imbalances can occur in various ways, whether at the physical, or psychic level, or both. Thus, when discussing disturbances of the body, Timaeus mentions diseases caused by imbalance or improper location of the primary elements, water, air, fire, earth (82a-b), diseases concerning the secondary structures, blood, flesh, sinew, marrow (82b), and
finally those caused by breath, phlegm, and bile (84c-85e). When he turns to discuss
psychic imbalance Timaeus recognizes the physiological roots of some of the excesses
and deficiencies that can occur at each one of the three levels of the soul. Bile and
phlegm beget various types of forgetfulness and stupidity when affecting the bodily
region of reason, recklessness and cowardice when affecting the bodily region of
spiritedness, bad temper and melancholy when affecting the bodily region of appetites
(86e-87a). And there are also diseases that arise due to a disproportion or imbalance
between the soul and the body, whether a powerful soul is associated with too weak a
body, or a strong body with too weak a soul (88a-b). It follows then that balance must be
achieved at different levels: (a) among elements of the body (82a-86a), (b) on each level
of the soul (87a-b), (c) between the three parts of the soul (69c-73a, 89e-90a), and (d)
between the body and the soul (87d). When faced with such a multitude of possible kinds
of imbalances, how can we know which balance to secure first? There is no ready-made
recipe, but there are some guidelines to follow.

In matters concerning health-disease, virtue and vice generally, Timaeus gives highest
importance to the balance between body and soul (87d). Balance at the other three levels
must be subordinated and figured out in terms of the overall balance of the compound.
The reason for prioritizing balance of the compound over its parts is grounded
ontologically in the fact that human beings are themselves modeled on the pattern of the
World Soul-Body compound which itself imitates the perfect Animal. Accordingly then,
we must choose every time to work on persuading those causal lines that are most
conducive to our overall soul-body balance. We get inspiration for how to do this by
looking at the positive role that an excess like fever can play in helping our overall balance. Fever is a bodily imbalance, resulting from excess of one of the four elements: Bodies afflicted mostly by an excess of fire will generate continuous states of heat and fevers; those suffering from an excess of air produce fevers that recur every day; while those that have an excess of water have fevers that recur only every other day, given that water is more sluggish than air or fire. Bodies afflicted by an excess of earth, the most sluggish of the four, are purged within a fourfold cycle of time and produce fevers that occur every fourth day, fevers that are hard to get over (86a). 7

Sometimes, however, it is precisely this kind of excess or imbalance that works as auxiliary cause helping us recover from sickness. Thus, when discussing diseases arising from the passage of air from the lungs being obstructed by humors Timaeus says that sometimes the air settles around the sinews and causes the veins to swell and the sinews themselves to stretch, causing tetanus and backward stretching. These diseases, he says are difficult to cure. In fact, the onset of a fever affords the best prospects of relief from such ailments (84e-85a1).

To see how an imbalance at one level of the soul can be made to work as auxiliary cause for the overall balance of the compound we can look at the way in which anger can help reason reestablish its rule over the appetites. Anger itself is an imbalance of the spirited part of our soul, and its physiological expression is the excessive heat of the blood (70b). It can, however, be positively used to further the overall balance as when it allies itself with reason to oppose excessive appetites:
The heart, then, which ties the veins together, the spring from which blood courses with vigorous pulse throughout all the bodily members, they set in the guardhouse. That way, if spirit’s might should boil over at a report from reason that some wrongful act involving these members is taking place – something being done to them from the outside or even something originating from the appetites within – every bodily part that is sensitive may be keenly sensitized, through all the narrow vessels, to the exhortations or threats and to listen and follow completely. In this way the best part among them all can be left in charge (70b).

Though proportion between soul and body takes precedence over balance at any other levels, the way in which this can and must be achieved by various individuals or by the same person at different times will always depend on particular circumstances. As individuals we have different natures that spring from different proportions in the combination of elements among themselves and with our rational capacity and thus we do legitimately have distinct inclinations, talents, and tastes, and therefore also achieve balance of the compound in correspondingly different ways. Timaeus’ depiction of the Demiurge working always in a way that avoids extremes and aims for the proportionate, the timely, and the measured (mesotes, to metrion, metrios 32a6-b8, 36a-b, to kairon 85c-d) suggests that Plato envisions the virtuous individual’s imitation of the Demiurge’s knowledge and application of measure and the mean (47d7, 59d1, 72e-73a, 86b-c, 87c-d). A closer look at these passages shows though that there are two distinct notions of the mean involved. The first two passages, describing the Demiurge’s use of mathematical proportion to determine air and water as intermediates between fire and earth and his use
of proportion to determine the right divisions and intervals that characterize the circular movements of the World-Soul make use of a mathematical, geometric notion of the mean, whereby the mean is established relative to given extremes. The other passages, however, requesting us to study astronomy, harmony, and rhythm in order to regain the sense of measure which our soul has lost due to disturbances caused by embodiment (47d7), to avoid intemperance with regard to food (72a-73e) as well as excessive pleasures, pains and emotions that drive us mad (86c), and to seek instead proportion between soul and body (87c-88b), seem to be talking about a mean which is prior to the extremes and by reference to which extremes are recognized as extremes. The two means correspond to the two arts of measurement distinguished in the Statesman: the art of relative measurement, which is used in mathematics, and the art of absolute measurement, which determines the right and the fitting, what is as it ought to be and in relation to which extremes can be assessed as extremes, and which we need to employ in political science and moral life generally (284e).

The absolute, practical mean is neither a form, since forms, unlike the mean, can exist independently of the realm of action pursued by beings endowed with intelligence, nor a specific particular, since the mean is an absolute standard that measures the fittingness of particulars. The mean is then not identical with the Good, but is a reflection of the Good at the level of our lives in the complex circumstances in which we find ourselves immersed. Rather than imposing a unique prefabricated recipe for life, Plato is encouraging us to maximize our access to happiness not independently but by virtue of the specific natural constitutions and talents that we have. A talented mathematician is
advised to do gymnastics, while an athlete is encouraged to exercise his mind (88c). But the mathematician’s balance once achieved still presupposes much more dedication to reason than to the body, while that of the athlete requires the reverse. To illustrate the same point, the ultimate purpose of vision is to enable us to do philosophy (47a-b). Yet Timaeus is not advising that everyone should at any given time use all the auxiliary causes that constitute our power of sight to do philosophy. His point is only that, absolutely speaking, doing philosophy is the highest benefit that our eyes can bring about. In fact, exposing unprepared, naïve, or very spirited people to philosophical ideas might result in making those supposedly ‘auxiliary’ causes of sight drift these people away from philosophy instead of bringing them closer to it (*Republic* 538d-e).

How do we come to recognize the mean? Throughout his exposition Timaeus presents a series of preparatory studies that contribute to making us better at recognizing the mean. The study of arithmetic, geometry (both plane and solid), astronomy (47b-c, 90c-d), and harmony (47d) are all-conducive to our study of philosophy and, with it, to an understanding of the ultimate reason of things in their teleological organization (47a-b). However, contemplation of intelligible forms is not automatically equipping us with the intuitive sensitivity that we need in order to recognize the mean in the sphere of action. The mean is not a universal and therefore not an object of knowledge in the strict sense.\(^{10}\) This is not to say that the mean is imprecise, but only that the determination of the mean is the object of intuitive insight rather than of discursive knowledge. Nevertheless, possession of discursive knowledge of forms is quintessential to the stability and constancy which we can attain in recognizing the mean.
The emphasis placed on the mean, far from suggesting that values are relative, suggests only that the ways in which we can reach value are relative to specific circumstances. Rather than lowering Plato’s high standards or advocating equal happiness for all, the doctrine of the mean is reinforcing the difficulty of living a fulfilling life, for it insists on the fact that there is always just one way of doing things right and plenty ways to go astray from it.

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7 All the direct citations from the *Timaeus* use Donald J. Zeyl’s translation.

8 *Republic* 415a-c, *Phaedrus* 252c-253c, *Philebus* 52b, and *Timaeus* 17c-18a.


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