

MYTHS OF CREATION
IN BRHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD
AND THE *TIMAEUS*. A COMPARATIVE STUDY

LAMPROS PAPAGIANNIS*

SUMMARY. 1. *Introduction*. 2. *The myth of Atlantis*. 3. *The Timaeus and the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. 4. *The birth of time*. 5. *The problem of evil in creation*. 6. *Conclusion*.

1. INTRODUCTION

I would rather live my life
as if there is a God and die to find out there isn't
than live my life as if there isn't
and die to find out there is.

ALBERT CAMUS

HOWEVER difficult it might be to define philosophy one would possibly be able to give several definitions all of them almost reaching its very essence, but probably none fully explains it. It has been argued that only three countries managed to develop pure philosophical thinking, with Greece and India being two of them,¹ while other great civilisations of the past, such as the Egyptians and the Hebrew, did not take their initial beliefs beyond the stage of religion.² The main problem associated with the globally used term *philosophy* is its Greek origin and its meaning *love for wisdom*, which leads us to think it more as an act of a never-ending procedure of productive thinking, rather than as something out of which a certain result should be expected. On the contrary, in Indian thought nowhere do we experience a term as complicated as philosophy – nor do we in Chinese³ – despite the fact that in both schools of thought the idea of endless and repeating is always present. In fact the same scholar claims that «whatever gives the Absolute (Brahman)

* Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GDUFS), 2, Baiyundadaobei, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China. E-mail: lampros.p@hotmail.com

¹ D. K. VELISSAROPOULOS, *Philosophy in the Three Ancient Countries*, Gavriilidis, Athens 2001, pp. 37-38.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 37-38.

³ However in modern Mandarin there is the meretricious term *zhexue* translated as philosophy.

its value, is nothing but the pursuit of the Absolute, not the achievement of It». ⁴ Needless to say a subject such as the definition of philosophy and the discussion between the differences between the way of perceiving philosophy in ancient Greece and ancient India is too subtle to deal with in a few lines. Here we shall discuss the origin of the world as presented through the myths of creation in the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* ⁵ and in the *Timaeus* of Plato. But before we do so it is essential that we place Plato and the *Upanishads* in the history of philosophy.

Plato is recognised as one of the greatest philosophers to have ever existed and it is more than certain, as well as obvious, in most of the cases, that he has influenced the western philosophy and way of thinking and consequently all western civilisation. Let us only remind of the comment of Whitehead:

The safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them. ⁶

Nevertheless one thing we must always keep in mind concerning Plato is that he carried approximately two hundred years of philosophical tradition by the pre-Socratics, ⁷ the influence of which on him is too strong to neglect; however, we need to take under consideration that this philosophical tradition must have been somehow filtered by Plato's teacher, Socrates, something almost impossible to evaluate, since the latter left no written sources of his teaching. ⁸ Some attribute the genesis of philosophy to the creation myths in the Homeric and the Hesiod epics and the hymns of Orpheus. ⁹ In the *Timaeus* those myths are re-analysed under the prism of dialectic thought, but also under the prism of rationalism. Indeed, Greek philosophy has always been a rational attempt of understanding and explaining the natural world; what it constitutes of, what the first element of creation is, how it is preserved, whether it is doomed to meet its end. It comes as no surprise that the first suggestion

⁴ D. K. VELISSAROPOULOS, *History of Indian Philosophy*, Dodoni, Athens 1992, v. I-p. 132.

⁵ Henceforth *BrhUp*.

⁶ A. N. WHITEHEAD, *Process and Reality*, The Free Press, New York, USA 1978, p. 39.

⁷ Often referred to as *natural philosophers*.

⁸ Although Epictetus implies that Socrates actually wrote something, which was later lost (*Thesis*, B.1). On the whole matter, see W. K. C. GUTHRIE, *Socrates*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1971, pp. 3-13.

⁹ Cf. G. S. KIRK, J. E. RAVEN and M. SCHOFIELD, *The pre-Socratic Philosophers*, MIET, Athens, Greece 2001, pp. 26-37. The references to ancient sources such as Plato's *Meno*, Hesiod's *Theogony* and Epictetu's *Diatrivai* or fragments from the *Genesis*, Heraclitus or the orphic hymns are by memory; those books were not used in any way during the writing of this article and thus they are not footnoted

by Thales was the result of astronomical, geometrical and cosmological discoveries.¹⁰

In the *Upanishads* the reader is often given the impression that rationalism is set in the margin and the issue of creation is examined as something rather left to God's will or fate. In order to conclude the relation between the *BrhUp* and the *Timaeus* we must go through the similarities and differences that come up, as they both can be proved essential to our subject. Instead of analysing the two works separately, it would be preferable to indicate the common, or different elements, which appear in each one, step by step, since their richness of ideas and myths might make it hard to follow otherwise. Needless to say a final epilogue and comparison will take place in the end as a conclusion giving us the chance to evaluate the idea of creation, how it appears in the two texts and whether it is to be considered fundamental or superficial.

2. THE MYTH OF ATLANTIS

A journey of thousand miles
begins with a single step.

LAO-ZI

In the *Timaeus* lies one of the most famous myths of all times, that of the island of Atlantis. For many years scientists have been trying to define whether it had existed somewhere on the globe or in the head of Plato alone. It is the story of an enormous island,¹¹ whose residents attacked Athens somewhere nine thousand years before the time of the dialogue; the Athenians defended their country successfully. If we take under consideration the close relationship between the *Timaeus* and the *Republic*¹² it is possible to detect a similarity between the two, since the initial subject of the *Timaeus* was not the creation of the world, but the ideal city.¹³ In a way this city could actually have been Atlantis itself; in the *Critias* Plato gives a full and very detailed description of the island and the way it was organised. The two works are connected to each other and it is very difficult to define which was written first. Both of them belong to the late dialogues.¹⁴ Some points, however, seem to be in contrast

¹⁰ J. BRUN, *Les Presocratics*, Chatzinikoli, Athens 2001, pp. 13-16.

¹¹ Bigger than Libya (northern Africa with the exception of Egypt) and Asia put together (*Tim.*, 24E).

¹² In fact Johansen argues that the *Timaeus* is a continuation of the moral teaching of the *Republic* (p.7). Moreover he claims that the telling of the story of Atlantis works as a means of persuading of the superiority of virtue (*arete*), perhaps because the *Republic* was not enough (T. K. JOHANSEN, *Plato's Natural philosophy. A Study of the Timaeus-Critias*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 2004, p. 9).

¹³ *Tim.*, 17C and henceforth.

¹⁴ For the order of Platonic dialogues see Vlastos' layout in H. H. BENSON, *Socratic*

in the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*; the most important is the role of memory and recollection, which is one of the most basic elements of Platonic philosophy.¹⁵ In the *Timeaus* Critias narrates the story by memory,¹⁶ whereas in the *Critias* it is said that he possesses the manuscripts of Solon,¹⁷ from whom the story was first told by the time Critias was only ten years of age.¹⁸ Thus the reader is left to think of Atlantis as the initiation to a new world. Somehow destruction signifies creation in the sense that it leaves space for something to be created from the very beginning. Regardless whether this battle described by Plato refers to a real war or it is only a symbolism,¹⁹ it is certainly a totally believable story.

Almost magically the discussion takes a turn from the attempt to define the ideal city to the origin of the world so that the latter subject may help the speakers understand how the ideal city should look like.²⁰ Before they go into the making of the world, Timeaus feels obliged to warn his fellow speakers of the difficulty of their attempt; they might not reach their goal.²¹ As one might have expected the issue of creation lies on the difference between Being and Becoming.²² Becoming presupposes a creator and the world must have been created according to being in order for the two to be ontologically distinct. Nothing can be created on the basis of something that has also been created.²³ Nonetheless, nothing is to be made unless there is a specific purpose for its creation. The keyword here is cause; thanks to cause something comes into being.²⁴ The main problem now is to define to what extent this cause is divine or even an aspect of god himself. It can be said that cause carries a kind of divinity perhaps made by god and given the credit to set the world into being. In that sense god must be seen as a craftsman and the divine creation as art.²⁵ Two main opinions can be detected as far as the role of the divine is concerned; either that eternity of the world opposes to the need for

Wisdom. The Model of Knowledge in Plato's Early Dialogues, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, pp. 8-9.

¹⁵ Although this can be detected in probably all of his dialogues, an excellent example would be the paradigm of squares in *Meno*. ¹⁶ *Tim.*, 25E.

¹⁷ Plato, *Critias*.

¹⁸ *Tim.*, 21D-E.

¹⁹ Perhaps a symbolism between virtue and immorality, cf. footnote 12. However, Johansen has also claimed that it symbolises the Peloponnesian War (JOHANSEN, o.c., p. 11).

²⁰ *Tim.*, 27A.

²¹ Johansen points out this warning of *Timeaus*, too, but only to state that difficulty does not imply impossibility, (T. K. JOHANSEN, o.c., p. 79).

²² *Einai – Gignesthai*, *Tim.*, 28A.

²³ Here lies the rationalism of Plato seeking the first cause, cf. Thales of Miletus (G. S. KIRK, J. E. RAVEN and M. SCHOFIELD, o.c., p. 88). ²⁴ *Anagke*, *Tim.*, 28A.

²⁵ This point of view is found in Johansen (T. K. JOHANSEN, o.c., p. 84), but due to its ontologically superior nature it not the kind of art which must be rejected as in the *Republic*, cf. Plato, *Republic* III.

god's interference²⁶ or that the world lies on a duality between the divine and the necessary.²⁷

3. THE TIMAEUS AND THE BRIHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD

All we see or seem is
but a dream within a dream.

EDGAR ALLAN POE

On the contrary no such thing is found in the *BrhUp*. Nonetheless, traces of the idea of conflict can be found in the beginning of this *Upanishad*. The horse sacrifice²⁸ implies superiority over other rulers of the territory and moreover the horse itself was released for a whole year before the ceremony would take place. The important part of this procedure was that if it would be found wandering in the kingdom of any other king he would have to either surrender or fight.²⁹

Just like in the *Timaeus*, in the *BrhUp* too, the relationship between the Being and the Becoming is very obscure. In the first verse *nothingness* makes its appearance, only to be capsised in the very next line.³⁰ From nothingness the world came to being, but strangely enough it was the creative force of death that was responsible for that. However odd this may seem here, it is essential to associate death with Prajapati, the progenitor of the universe.³¹ In a sense death (or Prajapati) is a dualistic force, since the act of dying signifies the beginning of life in the endless circle of continuity. Only when Prajapati starts to feel (realise) her loneliness, the creation begins.³² Through this Upanishadic version of the Cartesian *cogito*³³ she gave birth to waters. From the waters earth was formed and by an act of toil on earth fire was made.³⁴ Sun and air were formed by the division of Prajapati into three parts;³⁵ thus, the world according to the Upanishadic mythology is made in an evolutionary state, a progressive march from nothingness towards totality. This reminds us of the Christian idea of the creation of the world rather than the Platonic, where (in the beginning of the Genesis) we read: «In the beginning God created Heav-

²⁶ JOHANSEN, O.C., p. 91.

²⁷ E. P. MORE, O.C., pp. 217-218.

²⁸ *BrhUp* 1,1 (1), V. J. ROEBUCK, *The Upanishads*, Penguin Classics, London 2000. Unless otherwise indicated, the concrete references to the *Upanishads* are from Roebuck's edition.

²⁹ V. J. ROEBUCK, *The Upanishads*, fn 1, p. 393.

³⁰ "In the beginning there was nothing here: this was covered by Death...", *BrhUp* 1,2 (1) V. J. ROEBUCK, *The Upanishads*.

³¹ V. J. ROEBUCK, *The Upanishads*, fn 12, p. 394.

³² If only I could have an Atman, V. J. ROEBUCK, *The Upanishads*, 1,2-1.

³³ The realisation that Prajapati is a person in the world and feels the need to create a self (Atman) resembles the realisation of being as a result of thought by Descartes (*cogito ergo sum*) in his *Principles of Philosophy*, Part 1, article 7.

³⁴ *BrhUp* 1,2 (2).

³⁵ *BrhUp* 1,2 (3).

en and Earth». ³⁶ An almighty god acts as creator and forms the world as we know it from the very beginning. Light, darkness, water, ground, air, stars and every kind of living form had to be made out of nothing at all.

But according to *Timaeus*' narration the case is entirely different. God is responsible for setting the elements from disorder into order ³⁷ so as to function perfectly; such thing implies that the basic elements pre-existed; they are eternal and not created by any force. It is a fundamental difference and its significance lies upon the fact that, from a philosophical point of view, the power of god is put under doubt. So to what extent can the Platonic god be regarded as creator? And most importantly is the act of putting elements together in a way that they function properly to be considered as creation even though those elements were there in the first place? Plato does not seem to care since for him the creative force of god must be associated with divine providence. Thus, the true work of god was not only to bring the world into being, but specifically to do so by transforming the world into a living creature by inspiring soul to the world. ³⁸ Melling argued that the creator looks quite similar to the cosmic soul, but their difference lies to the fact that the latter was created by the former. ³⁹ Perhaps this gives a rough explanation of the opinion found in Johansen ⁴⁰ concerning the ontological difference between the two.

Although the distinction between body and soul is a characteristic feature of Greek philosophy, whereas in Indian philosophy one would have to argue that the idea of soul does exist somehow in the form of *Atman*, as does the distinction between spirit and matter, only in a more complex and unclear manner, however an ontological distinction can be possibly detected in the *BrhUp*, as well. More specifically such a distinction is implied by the spiritual birth of the self out of Prajapati. ⁴¹ The goddess came into sexual union ⁴² with speech so as to give birth to year ⁴³ and from this point on creation carries on. In the very next line of the same verse there is a strong similarity with the ancient Greek mythology. It is said that death devoured his offspring, ⁴⁴ which brings to mind the story of Saturn who ate his children in fear of losing his kingdom to them; but Rhea – his wife – decided to hide one of their children from her husband and that child later on killed Saturn and became the king of all gods and men, Zeus, who set his throne on the snow peak of Olympus. Even if we argue that mythology stands as the basis on which philosophical thought arose, ⁴⁵ in the *Timaeus* the reader is given the impression that Plato moved

³⁶ *Genesis* I,1.

³⁷ *Tim.*, 30 A-B.

³⁸ *Tim.*, 30 C.

³⁹ D. J. MELLING, *Understanding Plato*, Oxford University Press, New York, USA 1987, p. 154.

⁴⁰ Cf. footnote 28.

⁴¹ He desired that a second self might be born of him, *BrhUp* I,2 (4).

⁴² Perhaps it should be used as "unification" in order for the action to be pointed out.

⁴³ *BrhUp* I,2 (4).

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ The Orphic hymns make a great example of that.

one step further and, although his dialogues are full of myths,⁴⁶ which beyond any doubt play a very significant role in the development and expressivity of his theories, tried to set the boundaries between myth and logic and to come up with solid theories on how the world came into being, although he leaves a window open to the mysterious actions of an ontologically higher being, God, in order to work as *deus ex machina*. It is possible that this sexual unification of death is associated with the primeval incest, which takes place in the *Rig-Veda* between father and daughter.⁴⁷ Again no names are mentioned, perhaps in order for the reader⁴⁸ to focus on the act of incest and its symbolism of the other created by the one, although later on the incest is attributed to Manu.⁴⁹

It would not be entirely correct to say that *Timaeus* in his narration does not care about the irrational, the unspeakable. On the contrary, god is found behind the act of creation and his main contribution is that by using all four elements of nature he assured the uniqueness of the cosmos leaving no material for another to be built.⁵⁰ Apart from the uniqueness, god also ensured that the world would be perfect. Perfection may take many perspectives; but for Plato it is to be associated with uniformity and totality. This is the reason why god in the *Timaeus* made the world a sphere. The perfection of the sphere brings to mind Heraclitus;⁵¹ moreover the Pythagorean influence on Plato is obvious. The Pythagoreans considered sphere as the flawless shape.⁵² The philosophy of Pythagoras can be found throughout the entire work of Plato.⁵³ According to Proclus' theory⁵⁴ the significance of the sphere lies upon the fact that in comparison to other shapes of the same size, the sphere holds the greatest volume. In addition, one aspect of perfection is the world's self-sufficiency.⁵⁵ It was made smooth and without the need of limbs as there would be nothing out of the world to reach; and the soul was located in the very centre.⁵⁶

Philosophically this is very close to the Atman being the centre of the world in the *BrhUp*. In that case the Atman is somehow personified as purusa and

⁴⁶ In fact some of those myths cannot be found anywhere else.

⁴⁷ It must be pointed out that no hymn tells this story; there are only scattered fragments of it, cf. W. DONIGER, *Hindu Myths*, Penguin Classics, London 1975, p. 25.

⁴⁸ Or better yet the listener.

⁴⁹ W. DONIGER, o.c., p. 25, fn 1.

⁵⁰ *Tim.*, 32D-33A. On the irrational elements see the classic study of E. R. DODDS, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1951.

⁵¹ Ξυνὸν γὰρ ἀρχὴ καὶ πέρασ ἐπὶ κύκλου περιφερείας (common is the beginning and the ending on the circle, B103).

⁵² It is said that it was Philolaus, student of Pythagoras, who initiated Plato to the Pythagorean sect (J. BRUN, o.c., p. 34).

⁵³ Cf. P. E. MORE, o.c., 1917, p. 224. But More also claims that in Pythagoras and other sources where such theories came from it was only a "vague dream". It was with Plato that the universe earns its mathematical interpretation, p. 224.

⁵⁴ As found in Commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* and *Elements of Theology*.

⁵⁵ *Tim.*, 33D.

⁵⁶ *Tim.*, 34A-B.

it is not until the realisation of fear and loneliness that the Atman creates the female in order for life to begin.⁵⁷ But if Atman is the creator of the world then which is to role of Brahman? And how are the two related? In the *BrhUp* for the first time Brahman is mentioned, only it is mentioned in the masculine form, rather than the neutral.⁵⁸ Its highest deed is that He managed to create something greater than Him, the gods, who are immortals. From an ontological point of view this is a dead-end, since the creator would be expected to rule over his creations. On the other hand, in Plato god does not lose his ontological superiority over the world, which, to a degree, is related to the fact that in a way god remains the creator even after the act of creation has finished through his task to sustain the world. Thus for Plato it can be argued that the power which brought the world into being is the very same power which keeps the world as a whole and prevents it from being destroyed.⁵⁹ This theory occurs to the creative force of Brahman with the exception that it is left to *dharma*. Brahman in spite of forming the gods and the humans still felt incomplete, so he gave life to *dharma*.⁶⁰ And from this point on it is *dharma* that is responsible for the preservation of the world, but in a more ethical manner, rather than strictly metaphysical.⁶¹

However, according to the *BrhUp*, even this eternal existence can be put under doubt, since some verses seem to come to contrast. In some cases we come across Brahman as the only existing thing out of which everything derived,⁶² whereas elsewhere it is stated that Brahman «came into being through Agni».⁶³ Perhaps the creative power of Agni should be related to her being the goddess of fire given that fire is an exceptionally important factor of everyday life in all ancient civilisations. Moreover health was supposed to be affected by Agni.⁶⁴ In addition, it is not uncommon that in the philosophy of the *Upanishads* the self can obtain the nature of fire (among other elements).⁶⁵ On the other hand Agni as fire is possibly connected to light and the destruction of darkness and ignorance.

Nonetheless we must think of this verse as a metaphor for the creative force of Agni. Brahman continues to be the initial force of the universe. In fact

⁵⁷ *BrhUp* 1,4 (1-5).

⁵⁸ *BrhUp* 1,4 (6).

⁵⁹ This opinion is found in the philosophy of the Stoics; cf. DIOGENES LAERTIUS, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers: Book VII: The Stoics*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/diogeneslaertius-book7-stoics.asp> [accessed November 2, 2018].

⁶⁰ *BrhUp* 1,4 (14).

⁶¹ *Dharma* here is associated with truth and justice, cf. fn 60, p. 397.

⁶² *BrhUp* 1,4 (9-11).

⁶³ *BrhUp* 1,4 (15).

⁶⁴ G. S. PENDSE, *The Vedic Concept of Shraddha*, Three Angles Memorial Trust, India 1978, pp. 25-28.

⁶⁵ J. M. KOLLER, *The Indian way. Asian Perspectives*, MacMillan Publishing Co., New York 1982, pp. 88-90.

it has been claimed that the universe pre-exists in Brahman even in an unmanifested form.⁶⁶ Thus, Brahman becomes the cause of creation and especially in the *Chandogya Upanishad* this creation takes place in the form of “cosmic evolution”.⁶⁷ Elsewhere it has been said that the Universe lives within Brahman,⁶⁸ so it carries the point of view experienced earlier for Plato, that the same force giving birth to the universe sustains it, too.⁶⁹ For Brahman to work both as producer and sustainer at the same time it takes a kind of duality, which can be found in that it can be described simultaneously as temporary and permanent.⁷⁰ This point of view is similar to the Platonic soul in the *Timaeus* with the exception that the latter is subject to an evolutionary course, which takes place under the command of God. He cut through the soul and put the pieces together; then he pulled the edges and motion was made.⁷¹ Thus it can be concluded that god remains superior to the soul at all times; as for the difference between Brahman and the universe in terms of ontology the latter exists owing to the former, so in a way «the Universe borrows its ontological identity from Brahman» as Chari puts it.⁷²

The ontological superiority of Brahman includes not only the act of creation, but that of dissolution, too, as the latter provides the ground for the creation to take place.⁷³ Deussen faces a problem as far as the understanding of Brahman as cosmic principle may be dealt with and follows a four-fold path in order to have it sorted;⁷⁴ the four stages presented seem independent from each other, but what connects them is the presence of Brahman in all of them. Firstly, it is realism – the existence of matter independently of god; then theism, where *ex nihilo* creation takes place under the command of god and pantheism where god transforms into universe. Lastly, idealism. In idealism only god is real.⁷⁵

Nonetheless, it is far from certain whether *ex nihilo* creation is truly *ex nihilo*, as it involves the coming together of pre-existing elements, like in the case of the *Timaeus*. In a broader sense the idea of creation resembles that of cosmic evolution, as mentioned earlier,⁷⁶ which cannot count for *ex nihilo* creation per se. However, the term *ex nihilo* may be used in order to describe any

⁶⁶ S. M. S. CHARI, *Philosophy of the Upanishads*, Nushiram Munoharial Publishers, New Delhi 2002, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

⁶⁸ P. DEUSSEN, *Philosophy of the Upanishads*, Dover Publications, New York 1966, p. 181.

⁶⁹ See footnote 60.

⁷⁰ K. W. MORGAN, *The Religions of the Hindus*, Motilal Barnasidas, New Delhi 1987, p. 48.

⁷¹ *Tim.*, 36C. The symbolism is that the pieces were put together in an X and by pulling the edges an ∞ emerged, which is the symbol of infinity.

⁷² S. M. S. CHARI, o.c., p. 59.

⁷³ Deussen admits creation and dissolution within Brahman (P. DEUSSEN, o.c., 1966, p. 180).

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 159.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 160.

⁷⁶ S. M. S. CHARI, o.c., p. 3-4.

sort of creation speculating that the evolution is ontologically equal to creation. In other words, both in Plato and in the *BrhUp* we are somehow allowed to make use of this term, even if creation takes place not out of nothing at all, but rather out of setting the elements in order. Of course, in the *Timaeus* this is clearer, as it is specifically mentioned that the idea of creation is the setting the (pre-existing) elements in order, which is how the world is named *cosmos* (*cosmos* meaning beauty in Greek). Yet in the *Upanishads* we have no reason to assume that this is the case, indeed. The Hindu tradition prefers to present creation as a play; a play between Brahman and the world, which also implies its continuity. Therefore, the Brahman engages in a spontaneous play, attributed to the force of Lila,⁷⁷ the effortless and playful relation between Brahman and the cosmos. Lila is not personified and is not considered a god, but rather a virtue of Brahman. In short, the idea of creation in the *Upanishads* is problematic as nothing indicates how or why the world came into being and the superiority of Brahman could easily confuse us into thinking creation as *ex nihilo*. The force of Lila seems to be the solution, because it explains creation as an endless play avoiding the issue of creation per se.

From the above the question arising whether Brahman is to be considered divine, if divinity is what it takes for the world to be built. Thus initially we would have to give a negative answer as it is specified that Brahman gave birth to gods, while belonging to a lesser category.⁷⁸ However, there is a small poem,⁷⁹ which specifically refers to a father, whom we have no option, but to associate with the supreme maker of the universe. What is controversial about the omnipotence of the father is his relying on two elements so as to create the seven foods;⁸⁰ intelligence and heat (*tapas*). From a philosophical point of view at this point the Upanishadic version of creation is closer to that as presented in the *Timaeus*, because god makes use of components he never created and without which creation is impossible.⁸¹ If we think of food as that which sustains life then probably we should interpret the seven foods as the force responsible for continuity within the universe. If this is so, here lies a major difference with Plato.⁸²

However, there is also a strong resemblance concerning the nature (*prakriti*) of the Atman, which consists of three elements: *speech*, *mind* and *breath*, all created by the father.⁸³ The three-fold Atman symbolises totality as each element represents one third of totality: the three *Vedas*,⁸⁴ divinity, humanity and their middle (ancestors),⁸⁵ the three types of knowledge⁸⁶ and the three parts of family.⁸⁷ But above all speech, mind and breath are referred to as the

⁷⁷ Also written as *Leela*.

⁷⁸ *BrhUp* 1,4 (6).

⁷⁹ *BrhUp* 1,5 (1).

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ See *Tim.*, 33A.

⁸² See page 6 and footnote 60.

⁸³ *BrhUp* 1,5 (3).

⁸⁴ *BrhUp* 1,5 (5).

⁸⁵ *BrhUp* 1,5 (6).

⁸⁶ *BrhUp* 1,5 (8).

⁸⁷ *BrhUp* 1,5 (7).

three worlds.⁸⁸ The Platonic universe consists of two worlds, not three, the different⁸⁹ and the same. When the true *logos* moves through the different, beliefs are formed; but it is only when it moves through the same that true knowledge arises.⁹⁰

4. THE BIRTH OF TIME

Chasing the eternal
I'll let the years go by
Away they shall go and my heart will be
Like a rose I trampled.

K. KARYOTAKIS

Similarities do not stop here though; both texts have included the birth of time in their mythology of creation. The year is associated with Prajapati.⁹¹ Indian theogony follows a lunar circle as the year is divided into sixteen portions out of which the first fifteen are the nights. On the night of the new moon Prajapati enters the living creatures and is reborn.⁹² The *BrhUp* does not miss the chance to give moral imperatives in relation to the making of Kala;⁹³ no life should be taken during the new-moon night out of respect towards Prajapati.⁹⁴ An ethical problem arises from this imperative; how is it that ethics are differentiated depending on the given time of incarnation, whereas nothing is mentioned about the killing of a creature at any other time?⁹⁵ For Plato, too, time is a gift to humans from the god. What is meant by time is the harmony deriving from the distinction of the world into eras (night and day, summer and winter, past and future). In addition, time imitates eternity, says Plato, so what we perceive as now fits being, whereas past and future belong to the becoming.⁹⁶ Although it is mentioned already that ancient Greek philosophers are mostly interested in the rational explanation of the natural world (and Plato is no exception), unlike the symbolic myths in the Vedas,⁹⁷ however as far as the mythology of time is concerned in the *Timaeus*, this issue is left rather untouched. Plato prefers not to try to explain time as a philosophical term,⁹⁸

⁸⁸ *BrhUp* 1,5 (4).

⁸⁹ Referred to as other in the translation.

⁹⁰ *Tim.*, 37B-C.

⁹¹ Note that Prajapati here is mentioned as male, *BrhUp* 1,5(14).

⁹² *BrhUp* 1,5 (14). The invisible sixteenth portion is incarnated to all living beings (see footnote 73, p. 398).

⁹³ *Kala*: the Sanskrit word for time.

⁹⁴ *BrhUp* 1,5 (14).

⁹⁵ Although we shall not go into this problem, perhaps we need to consider the incarnation during that particular night as the becoming of all things equal to the deity and therefore murder of any creature would be the same as killing the goddess herself.

⁹⁶ *Tim.*, 37D-38B.

⁹⁷ J. M. KOLLER, *The Indian way*, cit. p. 32.

⁹⁸ As for instance did Zeno from Elea in his paradox or Aristotle in *Physics*, IV, 217b henceforth.

nor does he place time as high as the divine, since by setting time under the creative power of god, he undresses it from the divine nature given to it as one of the primordial gods.⁹⁹ Likewise in the *BrhUp* Kala is not mentioned as god, but only related to Prajapati. We can only assume that the reason is that both the *Timaeus* and the *BrhUp* focused on the great creative force of god in such degree that even time, although divine, is only brought to life under his command. Despite time originating from god, Brahman exceeds time and is placed in a timeless set, a fact which possibly implies a kind of superiority. In fact, Deussen claims that the beginning of time at a definite moment must be seen only «in a figurative sense»,¹⁰⁰ just like in the *Timaeus*.¹⁰¹

Following the birth of time *Timaeus* speaks of the planets and how they were made. It is surprising how close Plato's point of view of the solar system is to the modern scientific data. In the *Timaeus* it is argued that the solar system is organised in orbits with the exception that it is the Earth and not the Sun that is set in the centre of the circle. In fact, we are informed that the Moon takes over the first orbit, which is closer to Earth, then the Sun, Aphrodite (Venus)¹⁰² is in the third orbit and, finally, the fourth orbit is that of Hermes (Mercurius).¹⁰³ It is motion that gives the planets the possibility to go on their orbits and in fact it is a set motion which allows them to do so; what is meant here by "set" is that motion itself derives from god.¹⁰⁴ Therefore their orbit is stable and the planets are not to be called planets in the first place.¹⁰⁵

On the other hand in the *BrhUp* nowhere is it mentioned anything about the creation of the universe consisting of various planets. That is quite odd, should we think of the significance of this particular *Upanishad*. By and large, the civilisation of India has not neglected the art of astronomy. To be more precise, cosmogony and cosmology has been one of the five features of India's later tradition, the *Puranas*, with the second being the recreation of the world.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹ See Hesiod's *Theogony*.

¹⁰⁰ P. DEUSSEN, O.C., p. 153.

¹⁰¹ *Tim.*, 37D (the report on *Timaeus* is made by DEUSSEN, O.C., p. 153-footnote 5).

¹⁰² Venus (*Αφροδίτη* in Greek) is referred to as Lucifer-the one that brings the light (*Εωσφόρος*). Only in Christian tradition is Lucifer associated with the Devil.

¹⁰³ *Tim.*, 38D.

¹⁰⁴ For the theory of motion cf. also Aristotle's *Physics* especially Books 2, 7 and 8.

¹⁰⁵ Plato makes a pun with the word "planet"; in Greek the word planet derives from the verb *πλανῶμαι*, which means "to be mistaken". Over the years the word has taken the meaning of the wanderer. So planets must technically mean those that wander, but as it is said just before, they do not wander, but they rather move in a specific order thanks to the divine motion.

¹⁰⁶ The *Purana-panca-laksana*: *sarga*, *pratisarga*, *vamsa*, *manuantara* and *vamsanacarita*. Cosmogony and recreation of the world refer to the first two.

5. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN CREATION

Αργία μήτηρ πάσης κακίας
Laziness is the root of all evil.

An interesting topic regarding the notion of creation is that of evil. Indeed, evil remains a very challenging, if not the most challenging, topic from a philosophical point of view, however, it would be interesting to include it in the act of creation as (potentially) part of it. In the *BrhUp* and the *Upanishads* in general the creation takes place unintentionally; without any reason, but rather as a natural procedure. The problem of evil arises as opposing to the omnipotence (and benevolence?) of Brahman. In spite of several episodes fundamental to creation, such as that of incest or the horse sacrifice, considered as evil by our modern-day standards, the notion of evil cannot be depicted here, as those episodes are the very essence of creation anyway. Nonetheless, what could be considered as evil would be whatever prevents man from uniting with the absolute. The essence of the *Upanishads* further developed in the *Aryanakas*, the *tat vam asi*, is the relation between man and the cosmos, the nature and, ultimately, the Brahman. The *tat vam asi*, a former version of Nietzsche's "become what you are", urges man to discover his ontological identity and his place in the universe between the Atman and the Brahman. The *BrhUp* does not deny reality as preserved, nor does it deny evil as part of the reality. The deeds of man that judge him are also part of this reality and the eternal (?) cycle of rebirths, the *samsara*, is the outcome of those deeds. Though *prima facie* a negative aspect of Hinduism, the *samsara* must be seen as something natural and within the perfection of the cosmos as created by the supernatural forces seen above. Therefore, what can be ascribed as evil are the deeds that keep man away from his *moksha* (salvation), the *karma*. In short, *karma* is the ontological identity of man within the cosmos, his only proof that he acts as an individual.

It becomes apparent that the boundaries between evil and good are very difficult to determine, if they do exist in the first place. Not unlike the *BrhUp*, the Platonic *Timaeus* faces the notion of evil as a naturally occurring aspect of the cosmos.¹⁰⁷ Plato prefers to give evil a more social aspect and associates it with justice and injustice, for instance in the *Republic*. Yet in the *Timaeus*, evil seems to be penetrating the divinely constructed republic allowing us to imagine that evil is ontologically autonomous, rather than the alter ego of good.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Cf. M. MELDRUM, *Plato and the ἀρχή κακῶν*, «Journal of Hellenic Studies» 70 (1950), pp. 65-74, and H. CHERNISS, *The Sources of Evil According to Plato*, «Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society» 98 (1954).

¹⁰⁸ Cf. R. MOHR, *Plato's Final Thoughts on Evil*, «Mind» 87 (1978), pp. 572-575.

6. CONCLUSION

πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἀνθρώπος
Man is the measure of all things.

PROTAGORAS

It has been already pointed out that the nature of philosophy makes it rather impossible to come to certain conclusions. In fact, it is exactly due to its runny nature that philosophy is inexhaustible and has always been. Yet the conclusions of this article must be pointed out. The *Timaeus* is considered the only Platonic dialogue with a theme oriented in the natural world, perhaps homage of Plato to the natural philosophers¹⁰⁹ and his version of *On Nature*.¹¹⁰ The *Upanishads*, on the other hand, are religious and sacred texts, which have dealt with the theme of the natural world at some point. The two, indeed, bare a lot of resemblances, as we tried to demonstrate in the main corpus.

First of all, the theory of creation deriving from destruction is present in both texts, although the passing from one stage to the other is at the same degree obscure. It should be rather said that creation out of catastrophe is implied. For Plato this occurs with the myth of Atlantis. The reader of the dialogue is left to understand that the island needed to be destroyed so that something new would come out of it. The closest case of conflict we know of in the Upanishadic texts is the horse sacrifice referred to in the *Brihadaryanaka Upanishad*. Even better this can be extracted by the *trimurti* dogma, but according to most scholars this dogma applies to the Puranic era.¹¹¹

Many have dealt with the issue of monism and dualism in Plato. Indeed, it becomes quite difficult to distinguish the two, since the philosopher seems to jump from one to another.¹¹² It can be argued that the main juxtaposition takes place in the dialogue *Parmenides*, where he seems to cut off the bonding with the Eleatic school of Parmenides and Zeno, though not entirely. It seems that a compromise is allowed as long as the *One* exists as such by taking place to the idea of One.¹¹³ The similarity with the Upanishadic thought is related to the monism of the Brahman, which is clearer. This is a much more general resemblance of the two philosophical systems. In terms of creation alone the Platonic One and the Upanishadic Brahman work as makers, since they act and owing to their action the making of the world takes place. In fact, the true

¹⁰⁹ V. KALFAS, *Platon-Timaeus*, Polis, Athens, 1995, p. 11.

¹¹⁰ *On Nature* is a title given to most of the Pre-Socratics without necessarily being valid.

¹¹¹ With M. Winternitz being the most important.

¹¹² Regarding this matter see J. A. NEWTON, *Critique of Dualism-Support of Monism in Plato*, Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA 1992.

¹¹³ By "idea" we mean the theory of ideas, cf. *Republic* esp. Books I & VII.

identity of the one and the Brahman remain hidden only to reveal themselves under various forms. In the *Timaeus* it appears as god, whereas in the *Upanishads* it appears sometimes as Prajapati (*Chandogya* 1, 2), or Atman (*Aitareya* 1, 1), or Brahman Itself (*Moundakya* 1, 1). Nevertheless, those different forms are of lesser significance and the essential matter one should bear in mind is that for Plato and for the *Upanishads* the world was indeed created at some point by the forces of an indefinite almighty power.

Nonetheless, there are also some basic differences, which also help approach the philosophy of Plato and the *Upanishads* and consequently that of Greece and India. Firstly, we must remind that unlike the *Upanishads*, the *Timaeus* specifically refers to the birth of time. It has been already mentioned that time was worshipped in ancient India, but in the *Upanishads* we examined no specific reports were found as for myths of the creation of time. In addition, the *Upanishads* include myths of incest from where creation began. Plato faces creation with more rationalism excluding any myths that cannot be philosophically interpreted.

But those differences are superficial. The fundamental difference is the role of cause. In the *Timaeus* the world is created because of god's superb nature, who wanted to create a world as pure and perfect as himself.¹¹⁴ Hence, the will of god, due to his flawless nature, counts as the logical reason for the creation. On the contrary, the cause of creation in the *Upanishads* is rather trivial, if there is, indeed, one. There does not seem to be logic behind the act of creation. In the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* the fundamental questions are asked, while in the *Chandogya* and in the *Mandogya* we are informed of the nature of Brahman and Atman. But nowhere do we learn of the rational cause of the creation of the universe.

By and large, the similar points in the philosophy of Plato and the *Upanishads* are almost endless; some of them fundamental and others superficial. But also it is not hard to detect some basic differences not related to the themes of philosophical speculation, but mainly to the way the two schools face and deal with the philosophical problem. Clearly this article tried to focus only on the similarities and the differences as far as the creation of the world is concerned as this appears in several *Upanishads* (not necessarily being the main subject) and the *Timaeus* of Plato. In the introduction the hazards of reaching final conclusions for such themes was pointed out, so we shall end this paper with a speculation based only on the ideas that appear in the texts we just put under examination. The myths of the creation of the world suggest one of the many elements that both Greeks and Indians used in order to express their insatiate thirst for knowledge and for expressing the unspeakable and the miraculous.

¹¹⁴ *Tim.*, 29e.

This research attempted a strictly philosophical interpretation on the matter of creation in the Upanishads and Plato. Several elements in the *Timaeus* could be interpreted as Indian influence on Plato, which is possible, though not certain. However, it must be clarified that the philological interpretation of the texts has not been the issue of this paper. I chose not to engage into technicalities on the possibility of historical influence. Nonetheless, it must be indicated that some scholars have argued that the two nations came in contact even before the years of Alexander the Third (or the Great) and that might have been the case for the similarities we observed. Others imply that a common ancestor of the two is responsible for the resemblances. Perhaps a linguistic survey could shed some light on this matter. Having not examined the *Upanishads* in their ancient language and based only on the translations we could say, as a last word, that on the one hand there are, indeed, many similarities that show common ideas and theories, but the fundamental differences demonstrate two nations that obviously randomly transformed their natural instinct of conquer of knowledge to pure philosophical thought, whereas others did not manage to.

This, of course, brings us to the question what made the Greeks and the Indians reach philosophy and what made them face it differently and also to the question on the significance of the topics they dealt with (the myths of creation being one of them) and their contribution to universal philosophy. Nevertheless, I leave this subject to future surveys.

ABSTRACT · This article deals with the notion of creation in a philosophical sense in Plato and the basic Upanishad, the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad. This is an attempt to bring to surface any similarities and differences between the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad and Plato's cosmological dialogue (the *Timaeus*, though many references are made to the *Timaeus*' continuation or prequel, the *Critias*). An introduction in order for the works to be placed within a time-frame and then several myths are analyzed and compared, including the myth of Atlantis in Plato and the idea of time in both Plato and the Upanishad. In addition the article examines the notion of *ex nihilo* creation in the two texts. Finally conclusions are drawn as to the main points brought to analysis.

KEYWORDS: Myth of Creation, Time, Atlantis, Upanishad, Divine, Nature.