

Epistemological difficulties in Critias' discourse*

Oscar Velásquez
Department of Philosophy
University of Chile

Critias' discourse in the dialogue that bears his name —considered in close relation with the speech of the self-same Critias in Plato's *Timaeus*— appears to be an opportunity to examine an issue of an epistemological order in Platonic philosophy, which I consider to be of the utmost importance. In general, here epistemology should be understood as matters of a philosophic nature related to the knowledge and cognizance of both intelligible and sensible objects. In particular, here it also has to do with the problems associated with a relative knowledge of the realities of generation, in a sense that may be an approximation to a more modern concept of scientific knowledge. In other words, I refer to the degree of truth entailed in the objects emerging from the creative act of the Demiurge and the heavenly deities, or a sort of natural history. To all this, we must add a certain social and civic history related to the appearance of man on the world stage. The first *logos* or discourse in *Timaeus* narrates the generation of the world and of man in it. The narration dealing with men living in civic communities in remote antiquity develops in Critias' discourse, the first part of which is introduced almost at the beginning of *Timaeus*, and the second in the dialogue *Critias*. The theme, as may be remembered, is the story revealed to Solon by an Egyptian priest about the existence of an antique Athens nine thousand years ago, assumed to be an image of Plato's ideal city. Next to it, a naval power, Atlantis launched an attack aimed at subduing the whole of the Mediterranean basin. It is Athens, standing on its own and having undergone "the very extremity of danger", that finally attains victory, "generously liberating" the rest of the threatened nations. That Atlantis, we can also assume, is somehow a representation of present-day Athens. However, catastrophe subsequently strikes: the original Athens sinks under the earth as a result of violent earthquakes and floods, and the island of Atlantis also disappears in the depths of the sea. Thus ends Critias' narration in *Timaeus*. The dialogue *Critias* takes up the story anew and this second part of the discourse deals in

* This article is part of Fondecyt project No. 1060095.

greater depth with the description of the Athens of the past and describes its constitution, its geographical boundaries and the city itself. As for Atlantis (a supposedly invented story), Critias reminisces about its enormous resources and there is an outstanding description of its palaces and constructions. The account of the geography of the island is followed by a suggestive commentary about its kings, ceremonial rites, and periodical meetings. The story finally comes to an abrupt end after two pages that narrate the moral decay of Atlantis, whose citizens, full of unjust arrogance and lust for power lose the part of their divine nature inherited from Poseidon, the founding god, and tumble to their ruin. This appears in the second part of the discourse, in *Critias*, but it is above all the initial parts of both dialogues, *Timaeus* and *Critias* with their introductory conversations, that I am most interested in examining here. In both beginnings lies the core issue of this study.

From the perspective of this study, the point in question has to do with the capability of a *logos*, or discourse, or narration, within a philosophical dialogue to make a truth become manifest, regardless of the degree of certainty or reality that such truth may possess. In these two works, the dialogue relinquishes its dominant position as a means of philosophical investigation and discovery and gives way to discourse. Dialectics seems to be more compatible with dialogue; but as philosophical methods have been conceived to lead us to a truth, discourse not only can fit within the dialogue, but can also become independent and overtly preponderant, as in several dialogues of the mature Plato. However, the diverse foundations of the truth of a continuous exposition present many nuances. A ‘dialogue’ with discourses (or even *about* discourses) is something that Plato already could do to perfection, as shown by *The Banquet* or *Phaedrus*; and, as we can see, in *Timaeus* and *Critias*, discourses dominate the development of the philosophical enquiry in a way that is all too evident. In this context, a *logos* can be an oral (or written) presentation in which there is an account of something in the form of discourse. Thus Plato intends to give an explanation of several thematic objects that he sees closely interrelated: in the first place, a wide-ranging account of the generation of the world and men in *Timaeus*, together with a narration of the development of some very ancient societies whose origins, as narrated in the dialogue *Critias*, can be traced back to the dawning of human history. Atlantis and ancient Athens, according to Critias, were directly related to the origins of Athenians and their present history.

In order to develop a theme of such wide scope, there is a need for a plan, about which, in this case, Plato feels the need to say something at the beginning of either dialogue. In their justification, undertaken in the initial pages of each of the two works, he also elaborates on the basic epistemological principles that shall direct the enquiry as a whole. However, at the beginning of *Timaeus*, Plato surprises the reader with yet another shift, as he finishes the brief introduction to the dialogue with a sort of epilogue. This is a veritable recapitulation of a speech presumably made the previous day, the subject of which is the constitution of a ‘republic’ (*politeia*). Its inclusion at the beginning of the dialogue makes its influence soon be felt both in *Timaeus* and in *Critias*. What was told, which, as explained, was a speech about a ‘republic’ (*peri politeias*, *Ti.* 17c), reveals that the ‘capital point’ of this account was in which way and among what kind of men could the best *politeia* emerge. This epilogue, artistically placed by Plato as having been voiced on the day after he made a supposed speech about a republic, has thus now become the basis of the plan for the discourses to come and has transformed the intended trilogy of which only *Timaeus* was completed (*Critias* was unfinished, and apparently Hermocrates’ discourse failed to materialize) into a virtual tetralogy. This means that the discourses were to be four, namely, one by Socrates on the republic, one by Timaeus on the world, a third one by Critias on Atlantis and a fourth and last one by Hermocrates on a subject unknown which, apparently, was never written. There are reminiscences of the initial part of this great project in what Socrates considers his main views on his ‘republic. The final part is just mentioned, with no hope of it ever seeing the light of day, given the premature end of its predecessor, the dialogue *Critias*. It is obvious that the story of Atlantis creates an imbalance in the current unfinished series as we know it: specifically in *Timaeus* it leaves the marks of a tension that will display its true power in *Critias*. The “somewhat incoherent” character of all this great undertaking, a series whose “*torso* lacks true culmination”, is an issue that has received the attention of scholars (cf. Francisco Rodríguez Adrados, “Coherencia e incoherencia en la forma y el contenido del *Timeo*”, *Interpreting the Timaeus-Critias*, ed. T. Calvo, L. Brisson, Academia Verlag 1997, pp. 37-47). Reference has also been made to this interconnection of cosmological and political models in the tradition of *peri physeos* writings, in which the investigation of nature “refers to the origin and growth of all things from beginning to end”; in some of this investigation

“the Pre-Socratics...were seeking to explain how the present order of things was established” (Gerard Naddaf, “Plato and the ΠΕΡΙ ΦΥΣΕΩΣ Tradition”, *op. cit.* p. 28).

The *Timaeus* and the *Critias* dialogues will therefore be built on the foundations of something that is there as a mere recapitulation of an absent theme, but which becomes the main motivation of *Timaeus* and *Critias*. In other words, this ‘republic’, which appears above all as an ideal civic construction of virtuous men endows the dialogues to come with first class argumentative material and also conditions the foundations from which the whole of the great series was to be built. This is because the issue was political in nature and, as often happens in politics, in this case and to some extent, it was a matter of feelings of frustration arising from a failed purpose. The Socrates of this republic experiences a feeling of unreality vis-à-vis the project described by him. In theory, it is beautiful, but the concrete task of this republic, namely, whether it is possible for such a political regime (*politeia*) to come to exist and how it should be made possible (cf. *Rep.* V, 471c) has twice been postponed in the *Republic* admittedly existing as a book, and will once again be postponed there given that it presents only an approximation to its possible future realization (*Rep.* V, 473a). What I want to say, to be better understood, is that the ‘republic’ that Socrates reminisces about at the beginning of *Timaeus* coincides only in part with the *Republic* dialogue, but that the recapitulation made by Socrates about it, albeit imperfect in a certain sense, harmonizes very well with important issues of the first five books, particularly with the worrying idea of whether it will ever be possible for that ideal city to exist in fact. The echo of this deferment, of Socrates’ delay in proposing concrete ways for the city to materialize, has now been transferred from the *Republic* to *Timaeus*, since apparently rather than go into the circumstantial political arena, the philosopher should be able more than anything at present to carry out discursive argumentations, *logoi*, which within the very interior of reflection, in the very process of its discursive development, should lead by means of words into the act of staging the decisive passage from theory to action (*Ti.* 19b ss).

“And now, in the next place, listen to what my feeling is with regard to the polity we have described. I may compare my feeling to something of this kind: suppose, for instance, that on seeing beautiful creatures, whether works of art or actually alive but in repose, a man should be moved with desire to behold them in motion and vigorously engaged in some such exercise as seemed

suitable to their physique; well, that is the very feeling I have regarding the State we have described”.

In other words, the point is whether philosophy is really capable of materializing into facts with articulate words, in the very exercise of discourse, the thematic realities examined by thought in the realm of the abstract. The crucial point, therefore, has to do with the power of the philosophical word to move from politics as a *theory* onto politics as discourse that in itself should reveal a *praxis* or action. This decisive shift should emerge from within discourse itself, and give birth in it to the city as an analogous event to that of the actual founding of a city, with its men already constituted in a political state “exercising in the fight something of what seems appropriate for their bodies” (*Ti.* 19c). Consequently, we can suppose that Critias’ discourse responds to Socrates’ invitation (*Ti.* 19c):

“Gladly would I listen to anyone who should depict in words our State contending against others in those struggles which States wage; in how proper a spirit it enters upon war, and how in its warring it exhibits qualities such as befit its education and training in its dealings with each several State whether in respect of military actions or in respect of verbal negotiations”.

Thus, we assume that Critias, Timaeus and Hermocrates represent the city in action, and that they must ‘establish’ it in a discourse “before a war becoming to its condition” (*Ti.* 20b). Critias anticipates part of his narration, and Timaeus does his narrating, which takes up a large part of the work entitled *Timaeus*. Timaeus’ discourse has little to do with Socrates’ apparent aspiration, but it paves the way for human action in terms of creation of the world. The emergence of men within it precedes the foundation of societies and organized cities. However, if Socrates has felt “truly guilty” for not having been able in his discourse on the republic to praise “the men and the city in a satisfactory way” (*Ti.* 19d), it is Critias himself, at the beginning of the second part of his discourse, this time in the dialogue *Critias*, that expresses similar misgivings. Two dissatisfactions, therefore, are expressed through a feeling of inability to carry out a task (‘considering oneself guilty -*kategnôka*- of [not] being capable enough’), the general sense of which would be not feeling capable enough to overcome an essential difficulty. Socrates expresses this feeling in *Timaeus* as an epilogue to his discourse of yesterday, whereas Critias does so in the form of a preface that opens his narration in *Critias*. In turn Timaeus, in the dialogue

Critias, just complains that he is tired of having to do something about the development of the dramatic action of the series.

But, let us come back to Critias. From his first statement in *Timaeus* he intends to play a dangerous game as he declares himself to be already “prepared to tell the story” — that is, he believes to be at present in possession of the content and form of his narration—, and he dares to suggest, underpinned by these rhetorical procedures, that Socrates’ civic project, presented the previous day, had been revealed by him “as in a myth” (*Ti.* 26c). He is prepared to transfer it to reality (*talêthes*), which is not bad as a manoeuvre in the spirit of what Socrates had requested. But as this means penetrating into the particulars of Critias’ own story (*kath’hekaston*, *Ti.*, 26c), in which several concrete aspects of Antique Athens and Atlantis are described with brilliant thoroughness, because of its very nature his discourse runs the risk of disintegrating in this sea of singularity. Yet Socrates has placed Critias among the philosophers and politicians, and he expresses his confidence about the task. As he has a clear starting point for his account, he declares “I am ready to tell the tale, not only as an outline, but just as I heard it, in full detail” (*Ti.* 26c). Thus, the more he speaks the more credit he assigns himself to accomplish the task, without knowing whether he will be able to live up to it in the dialogue to come. He then tells Socrates, pointing to that primitive Athens of which he has begun to speak (*Ti.* 26d):

“For we will assume that the city is that ancient city of ours, and declare that the citizens you conceived are in truth those actual progenitors of ours, of whom the priest told”.

These citizens are the inhabitants of Socrates’ republic. But then once Timaeus has finished his discourse and at the beginning of the *Critias*, Timaeus himself paves the way to take over with a brief initial speech in which there are first signs of an unease hinted at within the methodological system of Critias’ discourse. Whereas Timaeus expresses his satisfaction and joy at the discourse that he has just finished, Critias now asks for ‘indulgence’ (*syggnôme*, *Criti.* 106). Even if at present this is a mere hypothesis, it seems plausible to me to see in all this Plato’s feelings in the face of the epistemological difficulties that have begun to emerge. ‘Indulgence’ is undoubtedly a compromising term for the narration’s claim to truth; and I wish to believe that it was not an oversight on the part of Plato but a sign of his dramatic acuteness to have Critias say that Timaeus had also asked for such *syggnôme* at the beginning of his discourse; because, as a matter of fact,

Timaeus never asks for indulgence proper, but expresses moderate confidence when he says (*Ti.* 29c):

“Wherefore, Socrates, if in our treatment of a great host of matters regarding the Gods and the generation of the universe we prove unable to give accounts that are always in all respects self-consistent and perfectly exact, be not you surprised”.

Timaeus assurance and satisfaction is based on the solidity of the method, which determines in a clear way the existing correspondence between the discourse and the object of these discourses (*Ti.* 29b-c); and given that Being and Ideas are the substance of a knowledge related to true discourses, the cosmos and the sensible reality are, in turn, the suitable objects of verisimilar discourses or narrations. The cosmos identifies with the image, which is the result of the orderly arrangement of the world by means of the mathematical model of produced by the Demiurge god, and becomes a sensible reality thanks to the generating movement of that divine geometry operating with space (*khora*). Thus, the discourses about the image give a content of verisimilitude to human descriptions of the cosmos and offer a sort of scientific explanation of the realities of the sensible universe. If the accounts of what is stable and manifest to the mind are also stable and invariable, and when possible, irrefutable, (*Ti.* 29b), thus, discourses about the image of the world share these qualities given that this “mobile image of eternal life” (*Ti.* 37d) is the likeness of its model. Therefore Timaeus’ narration, which has the attribute of verisimilitude, establishes a correspondence between generation, whose discourses contribute with ‘belief’ (*pistis*), and essence, whose discourses provide truth (*aletheia*). Therefore, as generation derives its entitative condition from essence (*ousía*), so belief gets its epistemological validity from truth, which is translated into verisimilitude. In these circumstances, generation becomes manifest as the equivalent of the image in the same way as essence is the equivalent of the paradigm, depending on whether it is an analysis of a fundamentally ontological character in one case, or of an epistemological character, in the other. Yet, *Timaeus* had apparently managed to materialize in a successful way the task of using a research method (and this is the main epistemological problem) that would conveniently fit the objects of the world created by the Demiurge. This method consisted in using the natural world, the *physis*, which the Demiurge had elevated to the category of a sensible god, as the legitimate subject of the creative event of origins, with its effects in

becoming. Man also, as generation of the stellar tissue of the bodies in heaven, including suffering and illness, is part of this discourse. We can therefore, with respect to Timaeus' narration, accept the conclusion that Plato draws after the paragraph cited above (*Ti.*, 29c-d):

“Rather we should be content if we can furnish accounts that are inferior to none in likelihood, remembering that both I who speak and you who judge are but human creatures, so that it becomes us to accept the likely account (*ton eikota mython*) of these matters and forbear to search beyond it”.

For the purposes of this analysis, I understand the concept of *verisimilar narration* as the sense given to the *logos* or the *mhytos eikôs*, a word related to a verb, *eoika*, which embraces the idea of similarity, that is of what appears to be or appears, and is in general interpreted in these contexts as ‘narration’ or account’ or ‘verisimilar discourse’. In other words, the so called scientific investigation of the sensible world constituted as cosmos is expressed by means of a ‘verisimilar discourse’. The knowledge obtained from the investigation of the ideal world should in turn lead us to a type of true discourse, the most proper object of philosophy. Thus, and according to another apparently analogous expression also used here by Plato, the ‘verisimilar myth’ is the vehicle whereby the Platonic philosophy of *Timaeus* channels and expresses the results of its examination of the world. This is a methodological finding that Plato uses as a means of expression in writing and is the result of an apparently new attitude of the philosopher vis-à-vis the world of becoming, i.e. generation. The world is now an object of knowing, which has a consistency of its own. The forms of the cosmos are consequently held within a geometrical net of psychic consistency (let us call it so as a result of mediating action by the Demiurge, which creates a soul made up of numbers for the world). This reality, which encompasses the whole of creation, the *eikôn*, the image, is the object of the epistemological work that results in a *logos eikôs*. With this *logos*, also, Plato expresses a knowledge that constitutes a doctrinary whole set on the reality of the image, which we could call a ‘doctrine of the image’. Facing this world, therefore, which is a universe constituted by this veritable geometrical tissue, is the intangible, which subsists in agreement with the ideal reality of the being. Thus, there is Being and generation, ideal reality and cosmos. In addition, this fundamental distinction (*Ti.* 27d) appears united to the fact that Being “is understandable to intelligence through reason” whereas the generated “is conceivable by opinion by means of

a non-rational feeling”. This is the core starting point of the issue I have been dealing with, i.e. that according to Plato we conceive of the world of becoming thanks to opinion, which is above all a spiritual capability that operates at a lower level than intelligence, but which operates in agreement with it and produces universal concepts about the things of the sensible world. These are the ‘beliefs’, the *pistis*, and Plato thus expresses the gist of his point: “As essence (*ousía*) is to generation so is truth to belief” (*Ti.* 29c); that is, being bespeaks a gnoseological relation to truth, generation and belief. In turn, Being engenders true discourse and generation, verisimilar discourses. I expect to say more about this.

In connection with this, we are therefore speaking of an issue that is epistemological in nature, which is to find out how Plato justifies knowing about things related to becoming. To do so, he must construct a doctrine of cosmic reality, the result of which will be an integral concept of generation, which are the things generated by the creative work of the Deity. This doctrine about the beings of the world is conceived in analogy and agreement with the theory of Ideas, and each one seeks to account for two types of objects: ideal and intelligible, the first type, sensible and related to opinion, the second type. Intelligible objects are linked to sensible objects by means of a causal relationship. This, as it were, is the feat of those events that that gave origin to the world and its inhabitants, of whom man is its crowning achievement. Thus, at the beginning of *Critias* it seems that Timaeus is satisfied with his method, although he says that he is tired and “takes his leave”, as he says there (*Criti.* 106a) and gives way to Critias “with the joy of the voyage of the discourse”.

So now it is Critias’ turn. But he has a problem. What is there to do when the objects of the verisimilar tale are now a history that comes *a posteriori* of the foundational events described in *Timaeus*? Because Timaeus has just finished speaking and just like Socrates in *Timaeus* bids farewell to his previous part, that is, his *república*, leaving an unsolved problem in *Timaeus*, Timaeus himself bids farewell in *Critias* showing overtly Critias’ fear of failure. He says, therefore (*Criti.* 106b-c, translation by Francisco Lisi, with some changes):

And I accept the task, Timaeus; but the request which you yourself made at the beginning, when you asked for indulgence on the ground of the magnitude of the theme you were about to expound, that same request I also make now on

my own behalf, and I claim indeed to be granted a still larger measure of indulgence in respect of the discourse” (R. G. Bury’s translation).

In these lines, Critias has pronounced the word *sygnôme* three times. Because surely, these new thematic objects that are at present the story of Ancient Athens and Atlantis may run the risk of disintegrating in an unattainable becoming. For me, disintegration in this case is to allow that *logos* should become undistinguishable from *mithos*. And it is because of this that Critias complains, and not without reason. He has told part of his story before Timaeus, in *Timaeus*, the dialogue; and now he has to face the fact that the character Timaeus has come up with the verisimilar narration about which he, Critias, said nothing at the beginning, and about which he knew nothing in his prelude to *Timaeus*. Now, when his turn has come, he feels somewhat confused: Timaeus seems to have thrown him off balance.

(A parenthesis, with your permission. I would like to suggest that this is the way that Plato works: his characters are his mouthpiece and, therefore, it is Plato himself that feels somewhat bewildered and wants us, his readers, to share his confusion. His method allows him to split into several selves: be a playwright in relation to his characters, change as many times as he likes, and act like Proteus, that wise old man of the sea, the Egyptian, from whose birthplace originates the story of old Critias, ‘who knows the bottom of the endless ocean’ and is the vassal of the founding god of Atlantis, Poseidon, (*Odyssey* IV 385 ss.). Old Proteus has his bag of tricks, just like our philosopher, and he must be kept under control no matter how much he resists: no doubt he is going to change into all kinds of people. As the poet says, we must do our best to ‘make him speak to us in his own words’, *Od.* IV 420)

But Critias clearly sees the point. Whether it is correct or not is an entirely different matter: what happens is that ‘what shall be said’ (*ta rhêthêsómēna*), i.e. the content of his *logos*, ‘is more difficult’, according to him. Because Critias assumes that it is easier to speak to an audience that ignores the topics being presented, than to do it before people who are in the know. And he may be right (now that I am bold enough to read my paper to so many wise people). Thus, there is very little that we know about the gods, and therefore, Timaeus was treading on safe ground talking about things that we ignore in practice. Critias’ task therefore becomes more difficult by the fact that he is going to speak about

mortal beings, not gods, and the experience that we have of what most concerns us makes things difficult for the speaker.

“For it is easier, Timaeus, to appear to speak satisfactorily to men about the gods, that to us about mortals. For when the listeners are in a state of inexperience and complete ignorance about a matter, such a state of mind affords great opportunities to the person who is going to discourse on that matter” (*Criti.* 107a-b)

In this ‘every man for himself’ Critias does not hesitate to question Timaeus and his massive discourse just to prove that what he is going to deal with, that is, the theme of his discourse “calls for more indulgence” (*Criti.* 107a). To a certain extent, Critias statement is reasonable, and perhaps we can see here a derivation of an important paragraph in *Phaedrus*, in which Plato relates the art of oratory to the audience, since rhetoric can be considered in its capacity to seduce souls (cf. *Phdr.* 271c ss). Obviously this weakens the search for truth and highlights the verisimilar as an instrument of persuasion in the courts of justice. It can be said that the status of being difficult has to do with an object, the knowledge of which is difficult to attain. That is, it is a thing obtained through much work (*Prot.* 341d). Here, on the contrary, along the same line as Critias, when saying what is most important, it is not objects that are the issue objects, but how and to what extent do those listening understand what is being said. Besides, in this panel of wise men constituted by *Timaeus-Critias* it is the judges that are the ones that are ‘difficult’ (*khalepoi kritai*, *Criti.* 107d). The issue of difficulty was no doubt circulating ever since *Timaeus*, where it has been suggested that “finding the creator and father of this universe is already a task (*ergon*), and having found him, it is impossible to announce it to all” (*Ti.* 28c). This finding has the characteristics of a discovery made “by intelligence through reason” (*Ti.* 28a), which is immediately related with the prospect of how to communicate such knowledge. Knowledge of God, from the perspective of a universe created by him, the marks of which produce mere ‘belief’ is a difficult task to accomplish; and although the Father of this universe is an intelligible object that may lead to truth, the knowledge that we have of him is obtained by means of sensible objects. It may be said that *Timaeus* is the history of this discovery of the Father of the universe and of the effort of making this known. What is more, Critias’ idea is to relate the difficulty of speaking about something with the knowledge that the audience has of it. But in these circumstances, and when

prospects change entirely, his method leads Critias, in an enigmatic phrase, to support his scepticism. He says, according to a first reading, “and we certainly do know how we find ourselves in relation to the gods”; *peri de dê theôn ismen ôs ekhomen* (*Criti.* 107b), the correct interpretation of which, according to the general sense of the paragraph and with gnoseological signification should be, in my opinion (as in Desmond Lee, *Plato: Timaeus and Critias*, p. 129): “And we know how ignorant we are about the gods”. And because of this, according to Critias, it is easier to talk about the gods than about men and things human.

This is no doubt a definitely subversive move that undermines the organization of the discourse of verisimilitude since this type of narration derived its legitimacy from the thing created in the likeness of the eternal model, i.e. upheld the relative veracity of the explanations about generation in the image, the *eikôn*, as a figure of the world and what is in it. And in this world, the goods are the first fruits of creation and are there for everyone to see. They circulate in the heights like heavenly bodies as if they were awaiting our consent, which transforms them in the higher objects of our ‘belief’, *pistis*. They are therefore a core theme of the verisimilar discourse, and because of this we can ask ourselves at this stage in my own discourse, whether Critias, with this artful device runs the risk of being left without a true object and without method. Faced with the situation of having to give an account, by means of a discourse, of realities that unfold in the coming to be of human action and are subject to the moral variation of conducts, the verisimilar narration appears to be losing the matter on which its relative consistency is founded. Furthermore, Critias’ own words seem to disapprove of the fact that the subject of the discourse should no longer be the image but an imitation and representation: “Bear with me”, says Critias, “in the following reasoning so that I can show you with more evidence what I want to say. Everything we say is, necessarily, I think, an imitation (*mimesis*) and representation (*apeikasía*)” (*Criti.* 107b). Although imitation is perfectly compatible with the image, such is not the case, it seems to me, of *apeikasía*, related with the *apeikadso*, which means to form ‘from a model’, ‘copy’, and the equally Platonic sense of ‘expressing a comparison’ or ‘being similar to’. This is quite close to the sense of ‘conjecture’, of ‘judging on the basis of conjectures’. This is not what Timaeus had done in his discourse.

Thus, there is a difficulty looming over Plato’s ambitious project, this time concealed by the aspect of inexperience and total ignorance of the addressee of the

discourse and, by the character of conjecture that knowledge has. On this occasion, therefore, as if he were retreating to the rearguard line, Critias intends to obtain advantage from a better opportunity (*pollen euporian pareskhomen, Criti.* 107b). He seeks help in the favourable situation in which he is placed by the sheer ignorance and total incapacity of the audience of the previous speech to verify the accuracy of the narration. The facility or difficulty to develop a subject is another aspect of the explanations that we assign to things and, consequently, they are part of the epistemological problem associated with the capability (or inability) to speak articulately about something. In view of this situation, Critias has provided some clarification about the spoken word as the reasoned expression of the realities of the world. He has shown himself willing to clarify his statement to his three friends of the dialogue (*Ti.* 107b), and this is why he has said to them, as I have just quoted, “the statements that all of us make are inevitably imitation (*mimêsin*) and representation (*apeikasian*)”. In a certain sense, it is possible to fall even lower and end up by being content with some sort of silhouettes (*skiagrafia*), mere dark and deceiving outlines of realities that lack the consistency of the other objects of creation; and hence are known only in an inaccurate way. I particularly refer to the narrations that take place in Critias’ discourse about the primitive existence of an Athens that was a true ideal city and the empire of Atlantis, and the historical details that are assumed to reveal the truth about them. But these details —together with the big issue— only increase the inaccuracy of the discourse; and our absence of criticism is likewise the product of the lack of knowledge about those objects represented which, in fact, we are ignorant about.

It is necessary to say that Critias paves the way a for type of discourse which, like a painter of natural objects, seeks to describe in detail the circumstances of a world of appearances of which there is no sensory evidence and which is hidden to the ordinary opinion of man. The introductory words of *Critias* intend to be a prologue to the description of two worlds that have vanished, the original Athens and Atlantis. The narration in *Timaeus* has developed in agreement with the image, whereas in *Critias* it has begun to undergo a shift that makes the framework of verisimilar discourse wobble. This is because the narrations about generation and becoming are varied and include both stories relative to the formation of the cosmos and the birth of the human race, e.g., Critias’ narration of these two rival civilizations, a story that in its first part, in *Timaeus*, he has considered as “an account that despite being very strange, is however entirely true, as the

wisest of the Seven, Solon, once said” (*Ti.* 20d-e). Yet, the series of tasks that the three wise men of today are getting ready to accomplish was considered to be suitable by Socrates himself at the time (*Ti.* 26e):

“What story should we adopt, Critias, in preference to this? For this story will be admirably suited to the festival of the Goddess which is now being held, because of its connexion with her; and that the fact that it is no invented fable (*mê plasthenta mython*) but genuine history (*alêthinon logon*) is all important”.

The comparison between an ‘invented legend’ and a ‘genuine narration’ places the issue between extreme limits, whose centre will be constantly sought in the discourse or narration which, in these narrations has been termed *logos eikôs*, or ‘verisimilar’ *mythos eikos*. The wide-ranging signification of the aforementioned expression, together with the enormous number of generated objects that it refers to is a real challenge that Plato faces in his attempt to confer a scientific quality on the contents of the sensible world.

This is the reason why just one man is not enough, and three are necessary to give an account of things and events (*Timaeus*, the dialogue, starts precisely like this: “One, two, three, but where, my dear Timaeus, is the fourth of those who accompanied us...”); and why Critias should relieve Timaeus in an apparent distribution of tasks. Timaeus is best versed in astronomy; Critias, in politics; Hermocrates, in war. And as a city has emerged from Socrates’ words, and Timaeus’ have generated a world inhabited by living beings, so with Critias’ those citizens of the beginning [of time] who dwelled in Ancient Athens and the island of Atlantis should become manifest. However, his narration stops abruptly shortly after starting on the account of the moral decay of the civilization of Atlantis. Everything leads to think that that it will continue on the epistemological plane of likeness and of the sensible. But the quality of the themes here described and the terminology used in these introductory passages of Plato’s *Critias* move us to think that the philosopher is trying to open up a new space in the themes of the discourses on becoming. Because while *Critias* aims at remaining within verisimilar discourse, it strives to penetrate the complicated ground of the descriptive minutiae typical of the human. Men begin to live in an original *oikoumene*. Here there is a shade of a *petite histoire*. Now, things are not material objects held together by the cosmic order of number, but occurrences, events that are the result of cultural efforts produced by the free will of human mortals. The story of the development of nature was in turn narrated in the central discourse of *Timaeus*, with

accounts that were considered to be verisimilar. On the contrary, *Critias*, refers to a story that in a sense is more limited, namely, that of human characters and actions; and they are fundamentally restricted to human everyday events and their historical projection. It has been said that this dialogue seeks to move from a natural history into a human history (R. G. Bury, "Plato and History", CQ XLV (1951) 86-93). This transition has undoubtedly led in *Critias* to a reformulation of the explanatory discourse referred to those events, as has been possible to prove in the initial pages of the dialogue.

Yet, if *Timaeus* considered as a narrative whole was not a myth but a verisimilar narration, there was a need for *Critias* to operate at the same level if its story was to have any sense when taking over from the previous dialogue. This is why Critias, among trials and doubts that we can perfectly well attribute to an aspect of Plato's own feelings, endeavours to collect argumentative evidence to prove his case. His story, then, will be supported by memory: from events to witnesses and testimonials; from an oral account to writing. Thus history becomes a story, driven by the very same objects that support it. The feeling of complaisance for a job well done in *Timaeus*, gives way to dissatisfaction at the moment of *Critias* taking over. The problem, in my opinion, had to do with the method, or rather, the insufficiency of the adjustments to be made to the verisimilar discourse so that Critias' accounts could be held as a plausible expression of some human events that were supposed to have truly happened. In *Timaeus* the whole reality of the natural world, i.e. the image, was the indisputable content of the discourse. When *Critias* begins, the subjects appear to dissolve as if a descending dialectics were leading the events back to the very bottom of the Cavern. We needed adjusting the way we look at things; and if things did not turn out well, they had best be left as they were; even if they were nothing but the remains of an unfinished effort, they were beautiful.

English translation of: "Dificultades epistemológicas en el discurso de Critias", Revista *Diadokhe* 7-8 (2004-2005) pp. 141-155.