

## Necessity and Nature in Plato's *Timaeus*

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"It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station, that great characters are formed. The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues."

— Abigail Adams



We all know that necessity compels us. When necessity forces us to sleep, we sleep; when necessity forces us to eat, we eat. And, as Abigail Adams says, when necessity forces us to have great virtues, we attain great virtues. I believe Plato also agrees with this. More extraordinarily, Plato thinks that necessity, or nature, compels us to seek that which is beyond necessity. Necessity compels us to desire something good, but we may not always have the good we want in the present nature. In the pursuit of the good, we are forced to seek beyond the present nature. However, in this process, we will encounter our own limitations due to our *human* nature. Although nature encourages us to seek itself, it discourages us from going beyond our own human nature. This tension between nature and human nature is beautifully revealed in Plato's *Timaeus*. This Platonic dialogue contains three parts: Socrates' descriptions of the best regime and its men, Critias' accounts of old hearsay about Atlantis, and the *nomos* of Timaeus. Through a close reading of these three parts, we will see how they consistently address the tension between nature and human nature, and prudently stay within the proper limit of human nature while pursuing things beyond mere nature.

The beginning conversation between Socrates and Timaeus indicates an insufficiency of nature in human affairs and a need for mankind to rectify it. Socrates starts the whole dialogue by counting the people present and noticing that "our fourth" is absent today (17A-B). This conveys an impression of incompleteness. With this impression, Timaeus's response to Socrates tells us the cause for this incompleteness: the person is absent due to some illness, and "he wouldn't have been left out of this meeting willingly" (17A-B). This shows two things: nature can cause a sense of incompleteness, and man wants to rectify it. Illness, which is an unbidden natural disaster, stops people from doing what they want and causes some incompleteness in human perception. Nature causes a problem that man detests, and man wants to rectify it. This desire of rectification is further supported when Socrates asks Timaeus whether other present people will do "the task of filling the missing one's part" (17A-B). Socrates asks this because he has the desire to rectify the incompleteness caused by nature. In addition, as Timaeus then accepts the task, the first aim of this whole dialogue thus appears: rectifying an incompleteness caused by the limitation of nature.



After this aim is set, Timaeus asks Socrates to recount from the beginning what he said the day prior about the best regime and the men made by it. Socrates then starts to recount the principles of the best regime and its men. These principles are agreed upon by Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates as well, because Timaeus says that “the regime you recounted was very much to the mind of us all” (17C-D). Socrates starts his description of the best regime by separating “the class of those who were to make war on the city’s behalf” from all other classes (17C-D). This may indicate that for Socrates, the class that makes war is the most notable part of the best regime and should be distinguished above the others. After that, Socrates further elaborates on the mission of the war-making class. He says, “Those who had to make war on behalf of all, and they alone, had to be the guardians of the city if anyone from outside or even of those within might set out to do her harm” (17D-18A). The class is here specified as “the guardians of the city”, and its mission is to protect the city from within and without. This shows that the potential harm of the city could come from not only what is outside the city, but also inside the city. What is outside the city is not ruled by the guardians, while what is inside the city is ruled by the guardians. As the harm of the city could come from within or without, harm could come from both people *not* ruled by the guardians and from people ruled by the guardians.

Then, Socrates immediately adds something that seemingly contradicts himself. He says, “They’d [the guardians] be gentle in dealing out justice to those ruled by them since they were by nature friends” (18A-B). But why would the guardians need to guard the city against the people who are “by nature friends”? If they are natural friends, there *naturally* would not be danger among them. But due to some unexplained reason, potential harm arises from natural friends, and the guardians need to guard against them. The intervention of the guardians is indispensable even in the best regime because nature, or natural friendship, is insufficient to preserve the city. We may thus suggest that nature itself is not sufficient for the city to maintain itself, and the rectification of human beings is always necessary for the city to sustain itself.

This necessity to rectify nature is further revealed when Socrates discusses procreation in the ideal regime. Socrates recounts that, in order for the people in the best regime to become “as good as possible in their natures right from the start”, “the rulers, male, and female, had to contrive some sort of lottery by secret ballots for marital coupling so that the separate classes of bad and good men will respectively be mated by lot with women who were like them” (18D-E). Socrates further says that the ruler should “keep a sharp lookout” to keep the worthy ones nurtured and the unworthy ones dispersed (19A-B). This indicates that Socrates thinks the best regime should secretly manipulate the marital coupling to ensure that good people and bad people are separately mated. On this basis, the rulers should also look for worthy people in bad situations and bring them to good nurture while dispersing bad people. This reveals that nature would mate good people with bad ones and put good people in bad situations. Nature is not sufficient for good people to have good mates and be nurtured properly. This then generates the necessity for the rulers in the best regime to rectify nature and make it good for the state. Thus, we see again the insufficiency of nature and the necessity of mankind to rectify it.



Moreover, when Socrates finishes his account of the best regime and desires to see the city in motion, which is the second aim of later speeches, the specific thing that Socrates wants to see may further prove the insufficiency of nature and the necessity of man to rectify it. Socrates firstly indicates that he wants to see the city actualized, and then specifies what he hopes for by saying:

“For I would gladly hear someone give a full account of her [the best regime] struggling against other cities in those contests in which cities contend—how she made a fitting entrance into war and rendered appropriate payment to her education and nurture in her dealings with each of the cities, by the way, she acted in her deeds and negotiate in her speeches” (19B-D).

Later, Socrates specifically requests that “you alone of those now living would render her [the city] engaged in a fitting war” (20B-C). This shows that, the main content of the city in motion is the city in war. What does it mean to have a city in motion rather than in stillness? When a city moves, it starts to interact with others. And this interaction is described by Socrates as the struggle against other cities. In addition, the first example of a city in motion Socrates mentions here is “how she made a fitting entrance into war”, and the last thing he mentions he wants to see is “her [the city] engaged in war”. Even the best regime, when it starts to move in the course of nature and interact with the other elements of the world, enters war. As Socrates says, the war of cities is triggered because the guardians of the cities sense harm from outside or within the city and try to protect the city (17D-18A). This suggests that even in the best situation, harm exists. This may further imply that the cosmos is hardly a harmonious structure due to the constant fight between its compositions. The world, or the natural structure of the world, is disharmonious because mankind always needs to protect itself from continuous harm.

After Socrates’s speech, Critias tells an account from old hearsay that shares the same perception of nature’s insufficiency for human beings. When Critias tells his account, the priest in the anecdote implies that nature is not only insufficient for mankind’s living, but also destructive in most cases. Nature is a threat to human beings because natural disasters, such as fires and floods, have destroyed many peoples (22C-23B). In addition, even when the geographical and physical situation is suitable for a city to survive, it is not sufficient for human beings to live with it alone. As the priest says,

“Now at this time, the goddess, having arrayed you before all others with all this arrangement and order, settled you by singling out the region in which you were born, since she observed in it a good blending of seasons, one that would bear the most prudent men...and you dwelled in the observance of such laws as these” (24C-E).

“The goddess” provides two things for her people in the city: a suitable physical position and laws. For “the goddess”, a suitable physical position is not enough for her state and must be aided by laws. Thus, in Critias’s speech, nature itself alone is insufficient for the living of human beings as well.

Critias also in several places implies the limitations of human beings. When the priests have a conversation with Solon, “the very oldest of the priests” says to Solon, “Greeks are always children...for in those souls you don’t have a single old opinion derived from ancient hearsay or any study hoary with time” (22B-C). After that, the priest starts to describe what happened before Greek’s oldest account of history. This implies that the Egyptians are superior to the Greeks in this situation not because they have more knowledge, but because their hearsay is older. Fundamentally, hearsay can only give them opinions, but opinions are disparaged in the dialogue. Later in the dialogue, Timaeus says “Now the one is grasped by intellection accompanied by a rational account since it’s always in the same condition; but the other in its turn is opined by opinion accompanied by irrational sensation since it comes to be and perishes and never genuinely is” (28A-B). This shows that opinion is something accompanied by irrational sensation because it is not always true. Furthermore, Timaeus says that “if he [demiurge] should look to what has come to be, using a begotten model, the thing isn’t beautiful” (28B-C). This shows that things that come out of what comes to be, including opinions, are not beautiful. Thus, the opinions of Greek and Egypt are both irrational and unbeautiful, but they live by them. Human beings who live by opinions live by irrational and unbeautiful things. Therefore, human beings are limited as they need to depend on irrational and unbeautiful things.

Moreover, as human beings are limited, their over-manipulation is bad. The priest says, among the many great deeds that are done by ancient Athenians, “there is one that rises above them all in magnitude and virtue” (24E-25A), which is the deed that “stopped a great power...in insolence”. The great power, which is the kings on the island of Atlantis, “gathered together into one” and enslaved other regions. Athenians in turn stopped them by preventing other cities “from being enslaved” and liberating other cities from enslaving “all ungrudgingly” (25C-D). Athenians here are praised because they stop an insolent power from enslaving other regions. This indicates that insolence and its corresponding enslaving are not good. *Insolence is the ignorance of the limitation of human beings*. Thus, it is good to understand the limitation of human beings and avoid insolence.

Furthermore, at the end of Critias’s speech, he lays out the plan for later speeches, and this plan shows that nature alone without the aid of human beings is not enough for the best regime. From Timaeus’s speech, Critias will learn about the nature of men, since Timaeus knows the nature of all. From Socrates, Critias is going to learn how to educate men to the highest degree. This shows that, in the construction of the city, Socrates’s part is about the nurture of human beings, and this is based on the understanding of the nature of human beings. This may suggest that, even if human nature is understood, it is still necessary to *modify* it to have the best regime.

Timaeus’ speech comes after the speeches of Socrates and Critias and shares some explicit or implicit premises with them. They share the fundamental attitude of the later part of the speech dealing with the construction of the cosmos. After Timaeus indicates that the cosmos has come to be by some cause, he says: “now to discover the poet and father of this all is quite a task, and even if we discovered him, to speak of him to all men is impossible” (28C-29A). Why is it impossible “to speak of him to all men”? I would suggest that this is due to the fundamental limitation of human beings. As shown in Critias’s speech, human beings need to depend on opinions, which are something irrational and unbeautiful. As opinions are believed irrationally rather than acquired rationally, there would be difficulty in communication between human beings. In addition, in Socrates’s speech, the emphasis on the constant war between cities also implies this difficulty in communication between people.

This reservation of Timaeus is more explicitly emphasized when he says they should be satisfied by “a likely story” (29C-D). He says:

“But if we provide likelihoods inferior to none, we should be well-pleased with them, remembering that who speak as well as you my judges have a human nature so that it’s fitting for us to be receptive to the likely story about these things and not to search further for anything beyond it (29C-E).”

Human beings are always limited by their human nature, so they would be satisfied with a likely story and not look beyond it. Human nature does not allow us to have something more. This warning of Timaeus recalls the censure toward the insolent kings in Critias’s speech. Those insolents who attempt to surpass a likely story and pursue a universal empire fit for everyone are ignorant about the limitations of human nature. In addition, a likely story is needed here because Socrates ordered Timaeus to rectify the incompleteness and present the city in motion. However, just as nature causes absence and incompleteness in the beginning of the dialogue, human nature causes Timaeus to be limited in a likely story; just as the absent one is willing to come but cannot come due to nature, Timaeus here is willing to know the whole but cannot give a perfect account due to human nature. Nature triggers human beings to rectify it while preventing them from perfecting it.

In conclusion, the speeches of Socrates, Critias, and Timaeus are consistent and share some fundamental views. They are conscious about human beings’ will to rectify insufficient nature and the fundamental limitation of this rectification. This understanding of nature and human nature leads them to have a very cautious attitude toward the possibility of a universal empire and a thorough knowledge of the all. Nature forces human beings to seek that which is beyond nature, but human nature forces human beings to stay in that which is human.