

From the time of the first commentaries on the dialogues of Plato to the present there has been vigorous debate regarding whether or not we are to interpret Plato's cosmogony in the *Timaeus* as a literal account. That Timaeus referred to his *muthos* as simply 'likely' (*eikos*) was convincing proof for most Platonists in antiquity that its true meaning could be uncovered only if we come to understand the methodology that Plato employed in writing it. They were inspired in their efforts in part by the perceived need to answer the critics of 'orthodox' Platonism, who were not of one mind in their views about Plato's methodology. Some, for example, maintained that he framed his account in the terminology of temporality only "for the sake of instruction" (*didaskalias kharin*) or "for the sake of clarification" (*saphêneias heneka*), while others contend that the *muthos* has exclusively conceptual (*epinoiai*) or hypothetical (*hypothesei*) significance. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the philosophical dialogue between these various factions of Platonism in their competition to capture the true intent of Plato in composing his cosmogony. I shall concentrate on the Neoplatonists and their respective reactions to their predecessors. Their concerns are basically two: (1) to defend Plato against the "impious" arguments of the Aristotelians and—perhaps more importantly to them—of fellow Platonists Plutarch of Chaeronea and Atticus to the effect that Plato's account gives us a creation in time and (2) to demonstrate that his methodology is designed to aid us in grasping the nature and extent of divine Providence and of the Demiurge's creative activity. After outlining the manner in which the Neoplatonists manage the first of these concerns, I shall turn to the debate between the literalists and the non-literalists concerning which interpretation of the *Timaeus* truly frames that dialogue as an expression of the comprehensive control that the Providence exerts over the cosmos. According to both exegeses Plato distinguishes between two stages of creation, the first a 'pre-cosmic' period of disorder 'before' the Demiurge begins his orderly generation in the second, thus highlighting the power of Providence in securing the victory of reason over chaos, a vanquishing that is played out everlastingly. On this point the Neoplatonists seem determined to counter the assertion of the proponents of a creation in time that a timeless creation, far from providing the conditions for the triumph of divine Providence, actually renders it impossible (cf. Plutarch, *De procr.* an. 1013E). But just as the question of whether or not such a distinction has merely didactic or conceptual meaning separated the literalist from the non-literalist Platonists, so within the latter group a more subtle disagreement over the extent to which the meaning is 'merely' didactic or conceptual produced factions as well. Exploration of how these doctrinal boundaries emerged yields a fascinating picture of the intellectual exchanges among the schools of the Platonic tradition.