

Samuel Todes: Practical Perception, the Conceptual and Binary Oppositions

Dr. Michael Kearney

サミュエル・トード：
実践的知覚、概念的及び二項的対立

カーニー マイケル

Introduction

Samuel Todes in *Body and World*, the edited version of his dissertation, develops upon the philosophical works of Edmund Husserl, Aron Gurwitsch, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and advances existential phenomenology's inquiries into the relation between practical perception and the conceptual. The original concepts on the development of human knowledge that Todes discusses in his work can be utilised in the investigation of the binary oppositional thought patterns that have formulated, and that operate as, the underpinnings of many cultural systems. This paper will briefly examine binary systems of thought as they are developed and utilised in Plato's *Timaeus*. Focus will then be placed upon the aspect of Todes's work that is concerned with the importance of the structure, positioning and movement of the human body in the development of human thought patterns.

Basic Binary Oppositions

In *Timaeus* when basic binary oppositions are used in the account of the creation of the world, it is not necessary for Plato to explain or develop the binary relationship for his audience. Plato utilises the binary oppositional system of thought that was a discursive practice of his *epistēmē*. Holding basic binary oppositions as natural and absolute, the relationship between the opposed elements of a binary is comprehended as polarized; thus, leading to the case where the mutually constituting play between the two aspects of a binary opposition remains uncomprehended. *Différance* remains hidden beneath the surface. The *différance* of basic binary oppositions is not considered, for these oppositional sets are the bricks from which a system of thought based on

oppositional logic is constructed. They are used to explain and define more complex relationships. As fundamental elements in an oppositional system of logic, they are taken as natural. Their 'naturalness' is precisely why they serve Plato well in his account of the creation of the world: from these 'inherent' truths, Plato can develop the more complex relationships needed to relate the story of the creation.

Timaeus begins with the *Introductory Conversation*, which has Socrates summarizing a discussion that was held on the previous day. The participants of the second day's discussion were Socrates, Timaeus, Critias and Hermocrates. The topic that Plato had these "characters" examining was "the ideal state and its citizens" (Plato: 1977; 29). In giving his "view of the ideal state," Socrates discussed an ordering of the ideal society that he held to be "natural" (Plato: 1977; 29-31). The ordering that this "ideal state and its citizens" is hinged upon is constructed of a system of basic binary oppositions that are presented as being an inherent, or natural, aspect of society: "we assigned to each class, as being natural to it, a single appropriate occupation or craft" (Plato: 1977; 29). In considering the guardians of the community, Socrates stresses that they "must combine the spirited and the philosophic" (Plato: 1977; 30). The guardians will administer justice to their "internal" "subjects, who were their natural friends" gently, and be "tough in fighting battles against external enemies" (Plato: 1977; 30). Concerning marriage, Socrates argues that "the men and women in authority" (Plato: 1977; 31) were to ensure "that bad and good men would be allocated for mating at marriage festivals to women like themselves" (Plato: 1977; 31). In using the basic binary oppositions, internal/external, gentle/tough, friends/enemies, men/women and good/bad, Plato provides a system of order that would have been held as natural within his *epistēmē*. This places his account of the creation of the world on familiar ground for the audience.

After Socrates sets up the ideal state in this manner, Critias follows with a brief account of the Atlantis Myth that "is not a fiction but true history" (Plato: 1977; 39). This is done to argue that the ideal state is not mere imagination, but rather that it is achievable. In the Atlantis Myth, ancient Athens is held to have existed as "the ideal society" (Plato: 1977; 33). However, before giving the full story of Atlantis and Athens, (This is in Plato's *Critias*), Critias calls upon Timaeus to give an account of "the origin of the cosmic system" (Plato: 1977; 40). Plato established a framework for this "rhetorical display" (Cooper: 1997; 1224) which moved from a concept of the ideal state, to the construction of an ordered "cosmic system" (the creator-god and the gods), to this system of order being brought "down to man" (Plato: 1977; 40), to the functioning of the system in ancient Athens. By representing the 'story' in this manner, Plato presents to the audience a progression of dilution from the cosmic to the earthly. However, in this progression of dilution, a system of argument, or thought, based on binary oppositions will remain prevalent. Plato classified a familiar concept, the ideal society, in binary terms. This provided him with the scaffolding on which to hang his story of the unfamiliar, the origin of the universe. This technique, moving from the concept of the ideal society, to a "true history," to "the origin of the cosmic," grounds *Timaeus* for its audience. By utilising an established and familiar starting point, concepts of the ideal state and ancient myths, Plato is able to engage in a metaphysical discussion of the creation of the universe.

Complex Binary Oppositions

Complex binary systems should be considered as binary sets that needed to be explained by Plato in order for his readers to perceive them as binary oppositions. In formulating an account of the creation of the world, Plato had to have Timaeus address the question that Martin Heidegger marked as being the fundamental question underlying all philosophical discourse: “WHY ARE THERE beings at all instead of nothing?” (Heidegger: 2000; 1). In attempting to answer, or circumvent, this question, Plato had to offer for consideration a reasoned argument for phenomena that are not sensible, or “visible, tangible, and corporeal” (Plato: 1977; 41), Plato had to enter into the metaphysical. In explaining the non-visible, the non-tangible, and the non-corporeal, Plato utilised the system of binary thought prevalent during his *epistēmē*. However, to apply this system to the non-sensible, Plato needed to resort to using ‘non-basic’ binary oppositions, complex binary oppositions. The examination of how Plato developed complex binary opposites in *Timaeus* will begin with a brief discussion of the Heideggerian question noted above, followed by an examination of the manner in which this question is handled in *Timaeus*.

In Introduction to Metaphysics Martin Heidegger begins with a question: “the first question . . . in rank” because it is “the broadest, . . . the deepest, and finally . . . the most originary question” (Heidegger: 2000; 2). This is the question that Heidegger finds central to philosophy: “Philosophizing means asking: “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” (Heidegger: 2000; 8). Heidegger identified the problematic aspect of this question in that “It runs up against the search for its own Why. The question “Why the Why?” looks externally and at first like a frivolous repetition of the same interrogative, which can go on forever; it looks like an eccentric and empty rumination about insubstantial meanings of words” (Heidegger: 2000; 6). In laying out the account of the creation of the world, Plato would have run into the similar problem of an “interrogative, which [could] go on forever,” of an “empty rumination about insubstantial meanings” that could never find the *Grund*: the ground; the reason; the foundation (Fried: 2000; xiii).

To ground his work, to address the “originary question,” Plato uses the concept of a creator-god. This is a concept that is prevalent in many religions but one that Heidegger considers as representing “no answer at all to our question, because it has no relation to this question” (Heidegger: 2000; 8). Heidegger argues that anyone holding “the Bible” as “divine revelation and truth already has the answer to the question “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” before it is even asked” (Heidegger: 2000; 7). The answer that they possess is that “beings, with the exception of God Himself, are created by Him. God Himself “is” as the uncreated Creator” (Heidegger: 2000; 7). However, the answer that God “is,” and that he created all does not get to the “Why” question since it does not address the “Why” of God’s “isness.” In Timaeus’s account of “the origin of the cosmic system” a similar resolution of a “maker” is reached through the application of logic. Timaeus considers the question of whether the world “has always existed and had no beginning, or whether it has come into existence and started from some beginning” (Plato: 1977; 41). His conclusion is that it has “come into being,” existence. His reasoning is based on the world being “visible, tangible, and corporeal” (Plato: 1977; 41). If it is these he points out,

it is, therefore, “sensible.” As a “sensible” thing, Timaeus posits that it must be an object “of opinion and sensation,” and as such it is susceptible to change. Being susceptible to change, it is something that has “come into being” rather than something that “has always existed” (Plato: 1977; 41). Timaeus then closes the point by explaining that if it has “come into being,” it must have done so “owing to some cause” (Plato: 1977; 41). This cause is “the maker and father of this universe” (Plato: 1977; 41), the creator-god. Timaeus avoids any discussion of the origin of “the maker” by conceding that “To discover” him “is indeed a hard task” (Plato: 1977; 41) and by quickly returning to what Timaeus sees as the central task that must be undertaken in their discussion: “distinguishing between that which always is and . . . that which is always becoming but never is” (Plato: 1977; 40). With this, Plato dismisses what Heidegger holds as the fundamental question underlying all philosophical discourse. Samuel Todes’s work on practical perception and the conceptual attempts to address an aspect of this elusive “why” questioning.

Samuel Todes

In his Keynote Address to the UTCP’s (The University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy) Inaugural Symposium, “Redefining Philosophy in the 21st Century,” on March 10, 2003, Professor Hubert L. Dreyfus of the University of California at Berkeley proposed the following:

By calling attention to the structure of non-conceptual, practical perception and showing how its judgments can be transformed into the judgments of detached thought, Todes is able to provide a framework in which to explain how the content of perception, while not itself conceptual, can provide the basis for conception. (Dreyfus: 2003; 2)

The development of this framework, which links human thought to the physicality of the human body, is a major advancement that bridges the divide between the “natural” and the “cultural” regarding how human thought patterns develop. Plato, presented binary thought patterns, basic binary oppositional sets, as “natural;” however, he neglected to demonstrate how this was so. The “naturalness” of these systems of thought often end, as does the concept of a creator-god, with the argument of their “areness,” for in this way they provide the safety of a foundation, of *Grund*. While Heidegger advanced a circular “why” questioning to go beyond the theological, Todes turned to the structure of the body, and its positioning and movement in its environment as a non-theological response to the “why.”

Todes proposes that “we generate the spatial and temporal fields in which” objects appear through the activity of our bodies. If “we are inert, our front and back appear merely as two different sides of our object body” (Todes: 2001; 49). There is no binary oppositional relationship between them: they are different aspects of the one thing but not in an oppositional relationship. Movement, activity, changes the relationship between the aspects of the inert body. Thus, Todes explains that in an active state:

... our front apparently brings into appearance what is *coming* to be because of what we are

(forwardly) *going* to do; it thereby produces the (future) field of what lies ahead of us. Our back apparently leaves behind what has appeared and thereby produces the apparent field of what is now *passed* (past), so that the front-back body distinction makes possible the *passage* of time. (Todes: 2001; 49)

With the above passage Todes provides an explanation for the development of temporal concepts, an explanation that is based on practical perception providing the circumstances within which the conceptual may be formed. He follows the above passage with an analysis of left-right movement where this movement generates a “spatial field for all objects” (Todes: 2001; 49). From these two propositions, Todes, is then able to form the principle argument for his theories on the relationship between body and thought, practical perception and conceptual:

Thus through movement we do not merely notice but *produce* the spatiotemporal field around us, our circumstantial field, the field in which things appear to us and in which we feel alive. Without our moving in it there would be no apparent spatiotemporal field in which objects might appear. This field has a necessary connection of its parts because it is produced as a whole. It is *one field* in a sense exactly correlative to that in which we feel ourselves to be living *one life* in it through the efforts of our *one active body* in it. (Todes: 2001; 49-50)

From Todes's position it can then be surmised that this natural situation of the human entity operating, existing and moving, in a gravitational field, with an up-right (standing) position providing a vertical axis, with front-back asymmetry providing depth, and with right-left rotational movement providing a horizontal axis, forms the framework from which the conceptual, and all thought and cultural constructions are formulated. Thus, here the argument can be constructed that the existence of the human in this natural spatiotemporal field (Todes: 2001; 49) is the foundation and guiding influence upon which human binary thought patterns developed. With this natural state of the human entity being forward oriented, the front-back binary oppositional set is generated. From this basic structural mode forming and interacting with the spatiotemporal field, practical perception generates the conceptual, which is hence structured through binary oppositional thought patterns.

Conclusion

Inherent within this constructive pattern is the element that leads to binary oppositional thought patterns. The most evident of these is the front-back asymmetrical relationship. With the eyes, mouth, and nose positioned at the front of the body, preference will obviously be fixed there (even the ears are positioned to be most effective in the reception of sound from sources forward of the body). Moreover, the appendages are structured so that emphasis is placed upon the front rather than the back. Consider the advantages of an upright position: it enhances the view of the spatiotemporal field; thus, offering the human better defensive and offensive (surveying the landscape for prey and other food sources) postures as well. The structure of the human body, a natural production, along with the body's formulation of and interaction with the spatiotemporal

field generates a dichotomous (from the Greek word *dikhotomia*, where *dikho* means apart) ideology of the conceptual.

The binary oppositional systems of thought that are matrixed into the human entity through and by the Symbolic Order, a cultural construction and therefore conceptual, cannot be held to have been generated by happenstance or a creator-god. The basic ordering structure of the human conceptual, binary oppositional thought, can be traced back to the natural situation of the human entity's body structure and its positioning and movement through its environment. The fundamental element here is that the conceptual is generated by practical perception. This relationship is "dependent on the spatiotemporal field produced by the body;" moreover, that this "field is produced by the way the body's specific structure constrains and enables its coping skills" (Dreyfus: 2003; 5) within its environment reveals a link between the body and mind that bridges the gap between the natural and the cultural in terms of human thought and identity. Based upon these suppositions an argument for the interdependence between the physical, the world of practical perception, and the metaphysical, the world of the conceptual, can be formulated.

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(カーニー マイケル 本学助教授)