

The Ontology of Images in Plato's *Timaeus*

[*British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30: 909-30 (2022); penultimate draft]

Even if we understand the *Timaeus* primarily as a piece of cosmology, not metaphysics (Broadie, *Divinity*, 4), and even if we bear in mind that Timaeus presents the speech outlining that cosmology as a “likely story” (*eikōs muthos*) (29d2), Plato’s dialogue is home to some impressive ontological distinctions. Much scholarly effort has been expended on clarifying the status of the receptacle and the role assigned to Platonic forms.¹ But the third ontological player in the *Timaeus*, namely, the image (*eikōn*), has risen to prominence rather recently and deserves more attention. For the main achievement of the *Timaeus* is arguably its account of the sensible world, and on that account, the ontology of images plays a central role: Sensible entities from the elements up to the world as a whole are all characterized as images.

The main fault-line in the debate about images is whether they are objects or characteristics (that is, properties). I will argue that they are characteristics, but my primary purpose here is to challenge an assumption common to both sides of the debate: that images are particulars. This assumption is a natural part of the object view of images (Gill, “Matter and Flux”; Zeyl, *Timaeus*, lix-lxi), but it is also accepted by most advocates of the view that images are characteristics because, with the notable exception of Cherniss (“Misread”), they take them to be particular property instances or tropes (Buckels, “Trope Theory”; Karamanolis, “Bundle Theory”; Lee, “Image”; Silverman, *Dialectic of Essence*, ch. 7). Against this tendency, I will argue that images are *general* characteristics or properties immanent in the receptacle, or

This paper was first presented at the 3rd Asia Regional Meeting of the International Plato Society (Seoul, 2020; held online). I would like to thank the organizers and audience for their helpful feedback, especially Christopher Buckels and Mary Louise Gill who gave me incisive written comments. Moreover, I am very grateful to two anonymous referees and the editor for *BJHP* whose comments have greatly improved the paper.

¹ I discuss the receptacle in section 4. As for forms, the main issue is whether the account of forms in the *Timaeus* is the same as that from the *Phaedo* and *Republic* (see Cherniss, “Relation of the *Timaeus*”; Owen, “Place of the *Timaeus*”; Sayre, “Role of the *Timaeus*”).

bundles of such characteristics. Indeed, I will argue that, fundamentally, there are no sensible particulars, according to Timaeus.

My argument will rest mainly on a re-examination of two famous passages: First, what Cherniss called the “much misread passage” (49c7-50a4), and second, the equally difficult passage on images (52b6-d1). Concerning the former passage, I will argue that the claim that any sensible entity is a “such” (*toiouton*) (49e5) implies that all sensible entities are general characteristics or bundles of them (sections 1 and 2). Concerning the latter passage, I will argue that *suches* are images immanent in the receptacle (sections 3 and 4). Jointly, my conclusions suggest that all sensible entities are, or can be analysed in terms of, general characteristics immanent in the receptacle. Moreover, I will argue that my view is compatible with Timaeus’ construction of the sensible world from triangles (section 5).

Both of our passages are part of Timaeus’ “likely story” (29d2). We should not assume, then, that the account of the sensible world in those passages is Plato’s settled view, relayed to us by a mouthpiece (Timaeus). Still, the care with which Plato sets up Timaeus’ account suggests that it is a serious, albeit radical, *attempt* to understand the sensible world. We will also see that this account raises hard questions about metaphysical distinctions that are often taken for granted, such as the distinction between particulars and universals. But to my mind, the radical nature of the ontology of images in the *Timaeus*, and the complications we face in grappling with it, make it all the more worth investigating.

1. The ‘Misread’ Passage (49c7-50a4)

From the beginning of his speech, Plato’s Timaeus is interested in the distinction between an “image” (*eikōn*) and the “model” (*paradeigma*) of which it is an image. Indeed, he describes

the entire sensible world as an image (29b1-2; 92c6-7), and thus understanding his ontology of images is crucial to a reconstruction of his overall account of the sensible world. Images remain in the background of Timaeus' ensuing discussion (29e-47e) of "what has been built through intellect" (47e4). In particular, he characterizes time as the "movable image of eternity" (37d5). But it is only in the subsequent discussion of "what has come to be through necessity" (47e4-5) that we get a systematic account of images.

The account of images is bound up with the introduction of a "third kind (*genos*)" (48e4) of entity besides a "form of a model" (*paradeigmatos eidos*) which is "intelligible and always the same" (48e5-6), and an "imitation of a model" (*mimēma paradeigmatos*) which "is subject to coming to be and is visible" (48e6-49a1). This third kind of entity, which we will consider more closely in section 4, is "a receptacle of all coming to be like a nurse" (49a5-6). For the receptacle is that "in which [what comes to be] comes to be" (50d1). By contrast, images are "what comes to be" (50c7-d1) in the receptacle.

In one of the most controversial passages of the *Timaeus*, Cherniss's 'misread' passage (49c7-50a4), Timaeus regiments our talk about entities such as fire (49b1-2). Thereby, he offers an ontology of images (here called *suches*) and the entire sensible world – or so I will argue. Timaeus says:²

Since in this way, then, each of these [i.e., water, fire, etc.] never appears the same, which one of them can one steadfastly affirm to be some this (*hotioun touto*) and not another (*allo*), without embarrassing oneself? It is impossible, but it is by far safest to lay the foundation and speak about them as follows: Never to call what we observe coming to be different at different times, such as fire, 'that' (*touto*) but [to call] fire 'what is such' (*toiouton*) on each occasion, nor [to call] water 'that' but always 'what is such', nor ever anything else, as if it had any stability, among the things where we take ourselves to indicate something when we point at them by using the expression 'this' and 'that'. For it escapes without awaiting the pronouncement of 'this' (*tode*) and 'that' (*touto*), and [the pronouncement] 'by this', and any other [pronouncement]

² All translations are mine.

which marks them off as steady.³ Rather, [it is safest] not to call each of them these [i.e., ‘this’, ‘that’, etc.], but concerning each and all of them, to call it ‘what is such’, which is always moved around alike, and thus [to call] fire ‘what is throughout such’, and similarly for everything that is subject to coming to be. [It is safest], then, on the one hand, to address only that in which each of them always appears as it comes to be, and from where it again perishes, by using the name ‘that’ (*touto*) and ‘this’ (*tode*), and on the other hand, for what is of some sort (*hopoionoun ti*), warm or white or indeed any of the opposites, and all entities that are from them, to call none of them that [i.e., ‘that’ or ‘this’].⁴ (49c7-50a4)

My translation is an instance of the so-called ‘traditional’ translation (see, e.g., Gill, “Matter and Flux”; Zeyl, *Timaeus*), which Cherniss (“Misread”) sought to correct with his ‘alternative’ translation (see also Lee, “Image”). The two translations differ in which linguistic items they take Timaeus to be regimenting: According to the traditional translation, Timaeus regiments (only) the use of ‘this’, ‘that’, and ‘what is such’, whereas on the alternative translation, he (also) regiments the use of ‘fire’, ‘water’, and so forth. Most importantly, at 49d5-6, the traditional translator has it that we should not “call fire ‘this’ but ‘what is such’”, but the alternative translator has it that we should “call not this but what is such ‘fire’” (Zeyl, *Timaeus*, lvi-lvii).

It is sometimes said that, by itself, the text could go either way (Gill, “Matter and Flux”, 36), but this seems true only if we restrict our attention to 49d5-6. As a whole, the passage favours the traditional translation. For Plato consistently attaches linguistic markers to ‘this’ and ‘that’, not to ‘fire’ or ‘water’. He says that we use “the expression ‘this’ and ‘that’” (*tōi*

³ Unlike, e.g., Cherniss, “Misread”, I do not excise “καὶ τὴν τῷδε” (“and [the pronouncement] ‘by this’” at 49e3. Timaeus’ point may be that no grammatical form of ‘this’ or ‘that’ should be used to refer to images.

⁴ οὕτω δὴ τούτων οὐδέποτε τῶν αὐτῶν ἐκάστων φανταζομένων, ποῖον αὐτῶν ὡς ὄν ὅτιοῦν τοῦτο καὶ οὐκ ἄλλο παγίως δυσχυριζόμενος οὐκ αἰσχυνεῖται τις ἑαυτόν; οὐκ ἔστιν, ἀλλ’ ἀσφαλέστατα μακρῶ περὶ τούτων τιθεμένους ὧδε λέγειν· αἰεὶ ὁ καθορῶμεν ἄλλοτε ἄλλη γιγνόμενον, ὡς πῦρ, μὴ τοῦτο ἀλλὰ τὸ τοιοῦτον ἐκάστοτε προσαγορεύειν πῦρ, μηδὲ ὕδωρ τοῦτο ἀλλὰ τὸ τοιοῦτον αἰεὶ, μηδὲ ἄλλο ποτὲ μηδὲν ὡς τινα ἔχον βεβαιότητα, ὅσα δεικνύντες τῷ ῥήματι τῷ τότε καὶ τοῦτο προσχρώμενοι δηλοῦν ἡγοούμεθά τι· φεύγει γὰρ οὐχ ὑπομένον τὴν τοῦ τότε καὶ τοῦτο καὶ τὴν τῷδε καὶ πᾶσαν ὄση μόνιμα ὡς ὄντα αὐτὰ ἐνδείκνυται φάσις. ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν ἕκαστα μὴ λέγειν, τὸ δὲ τοιοῦτον αἰεὶ περιφερόμενον ὁμοιον ἐκάστου πέρι καὶ συμπάντων οὕτω καλεῖν, καὶ δὴ καὶ πῦρ τὸ διὰ παντός τοιοῦτον, καὶ ἅπαν ὅσον περ ἂν ἔχη γένεσιν· ἐν ᾧ δὲ ἐγγιγνόμενα αἰεὶ ἕκαστα αὐτῶν φαντάζεται καὶ πάλιν ἐκεῖθεν ἀπόλλυται, μόνον ἐκεῖνο αὐτὸ προσαγορεύειν τῷ τε τοῦτο καὶ τῷ τότε προσχρωμένους ὀνόματι, τὸ δὲ ὅποιον οὐν τι, θερμὸν ἢ λευκὸν ἢ καὶ ὅτιοῦν τῶν ἐναντίων, καὶ πάνθ’ ὅσα ἐκ τούτων, μηδὲν ἐκεῖνο αὐτὸ τούτων καλεῖν.

rhēmati tōi tode kai touto) (49e1), and again that we use “the name ‘that’ and ‘this’” (*tōi te touto kai tōi tode onomati*) (50a1-2). These translations are accepted by alternative translators (Cherniss, “Misread”; see also Zeyl, *Timaeus*, lvii). Hence, they must think that, in some parts of our passage, Timaeus discusses the linguistic items ‘this’, ‘that’, and ‘what is such’, but in others, he has in mind worldly *thises*, *thats*, and *what-is-suches*. But there is no explicit distinction of this sort in the passage. It is better, then, to let the explicit statement that ‘this’, ‘that’, and ‘what is such’ are linguistic items guide our reading of the entire passage.

The traditional translation, then, is preferable. But its philosophical consequences tend to be misconstrued. Gill (“Matter and Flux”, 36), for example, says that Plato’s Timaeus “legitimizes talk about such *objects* [i.e., fire, water, etc.]” (my italics), and Zeyl (*Timaeus*, lx) thinks that “particulars are the familiar entities they have been all along”. But this is an odd conclusion to draw from the traditional translation. Unlike on the alternative translation, nothing about our use of predicates such as ‘fire’ is wrong in and of itself. Still, if we want to *correctly* speak about fire, we must understand that we cannot refer to it by ‘this’ but only by ‘what is such’, and this is presumably because fire is not a *this* but rather a *what is such*. Yet, if changeable entities like fire are not *thises* but *suches*, they no longer seem to be the particulars we were familiar with, nor indeed objects at all – which is just the conclusion reached by advocates of the alternative translation (Cherniss, “Misread”; Lee, “Image”).

There is further evidence that *suches* are not objects but characteristics at the end of the ‘misread’ passage. Generalizing his conclusion concerning fire, Timaeus says that one should not use the demonstratives for “what is of some sort, warm or white or indeed any of the opposites, and all entities that are from them” (50a2-4). These lines suggest that Timaeus’ regimentation of language concerned *qualities*, such as warm and white. Aristotle’s term for the category of “quality” is “*poion*” (e.g., *Cat.* 4, 1b26), and it seems that Timaeus’s “what is of some sort” (*hopoionoun ti*) fulfils a similar function to Aristotle’s “*poion*” in picking out

qualities rather than objects that bear those qualities. At least, I find it hard to see how the expression could refer to a particular object, or how “warm” and “white” could refer to objects rather than qualities and hence characteristics (see Cornford, *Cosmology*, 180-81).

Advocates of the object view of *suches* could retort that other passages pull in their direction, for instance, Timaeus’ later claim that the receptacle receives “all the bodies” (50b6). If bodies are three-dimensional objects, and the entities received are the *suches* from the ‘misread’ passage, the latter turn out to be objects after all (Zeyl & Sattler, “Plato’s *Timaeus*”, sect. 6). But the claim about bodies should be read in context: two similes intended to elucidate the nature of the receptacle. The first simile, which immediately precedes the claim about bodies, compares the receptacle with gold in which “figures” (*schēmata*) such as the triangle come to be (50b2-3). The second simile likens the receptacle to an “impress” (*ekmageion*) which is “configured” (*diaschēmatizomenon*) by the entities it receives (50c2-3).

The emphasis on “figures” in these similes suggests that what is received is a sort of shape impressed on the receptacle. In the same vein, Timaeus emphasizes that, by itself, the receptacle does not have the same “shape” (*morphēn*) as the entities entering it (50c1), and in a later summary passage, he will conclude that the receptacle receives “the shapes (*morphas*) of earth and air” (52d5-6). What the receptacle receives, then, is *shapes*. Hence, the mention of “body” is best understood as a reference to a three-dimensional shape rather than a sensible particular (for more on geometric figures, see section 5).

One might object further that Timaeus’ account of the physical world relies on an ontology of particular *things*, not just characteristics. For example, Timaeus says of the liver that it is “dense, smooth, bright, sweet, and having bitterness” (71b2) and likens it to a mirror which receives “impressions” (*tupous*) and presents “likenesses” (*eidōla*) to the viewer (71b4-5). Similarly, he says about marrow that the god “planting the kinds of soul in [the marrow] tied them down in it” (73c3-4), and about bone, he claims that “having sifted earth pure and

smooth, [the god] kneaded and wettened it with marrow” (73e1-2) before baking it in fire.

Thus, Timaeus’ description of the cosmos and its creation seems to presuppose physical processes that involve concrete objects, not only characteristics.

In response, I suggest that the linguistic regimentation of the ‘misread’ passage gives us a *translation scheme* for claims about sensible particulars. For Timaeus argues that we should speak of entities ordinarily treated as sensible objects as ‘suches’. Plausibly, this normative claim presupposes that our ordinary talk about sensible particulars *can* be translated into talk of ‘suches’; otherwise, we could never speak correctly. The availability of a translation scheme takes some pressure off the linguistic regimentation: Although it is, strictly, incorrect to speak of ‘objects’, we may resort to familiar object talk, as long as we bear in mind the translation scheme. This, I suggest, is precisely what Timaeus does: When he describes the human body, he can put the description in terms of sensible particulars without undermining the stricture from the ‘misread’ passage. For we are to understand that his claims should be translated into the language of ‘suches’ and that, strictly, there are no objects to be planted or baked, but only characteristics (*suches*) to be combined (as discussed below).

Despite the objection, then, there is good reason to believe that the *suches* in the ‘misread’ passage are characteristics, not objects. But there is a further question as to what sort of characteristics they are. Many scholars have argued that entities like fire are particular property instances or *tropes*, such as the fieriness of this fire in my fireplace (Buckels, “Trope Theory”; Karamanolis, “Bundle Theory”; see also Lee, “Image”; Silverman, “Timaeian Particulars”; *Dialectic of Essence*, ch. 7). But the trope view runs into the same objection as the object view: If *suches* were particulars, whether objects or tropes, why should one not be allowed to refer to them as ‘this’ or ‘that’? For particulars are precisely the sorts of entity one could legitimately point to by means of such expressions.

What is more, advocates of the trope view tend to misconstrue the expression “*toiouton*” or “what is such”. For they translate it as “this such”, which is taken to imply that Timaeus is concerned with particular characteristics (Buckels, “Trope Theory”, 10; Karamanolis, “Bundle Theory”, 154). But the expression “this such” contains the English analogue of the Greek word which Timaeus tells us *not* to use to refer to entities such as fire, namely, “*tode*” (“this”). *Instead*, we should use the word “*toiouton*” or “what is such”. Hence, the trope view conflates the two expressions which Timaeus is at pains to keep apart.

If Timaeus’ *suches* are characteristics, but not tropes, Cherniss (“Misread”) seems to be right that they are *general* characteristics or properties. Next, I will defend an understanding of a ‘general characteristic’ which allows us to draw that conclusion in Timaeus’ ontological setting. Moreover, I will introduce a distinction between simple *suches* and complex *suches* where the former are general characteristics, and the latter are bundles of simple *suches*.

2. Simple *Suches* and Complex *Suches*

We saw that Timaeus speaks of the *such* as “*hopoionoun ti*” or “what is of some sort” (50a2-3). Karamanolis (“Bundle Theory”, 154) claims that this expression implies that entities like warm or white are particular property instances or tropes. But he relies on a *disanalogous* expression in Aristotle’s *Categories*. There, Aristotle arguably refers to tropes by expressions such as “*to ti leukon*” or “the some white” (*Cat.* 2, 1a27). But “*hopoionoun ti*” seems to refer to a *sort* of entity as contrasted with a particular “this” or “that”. Hence, *suches* appear to be general characteristics or properties, not tropes. Although I cannot offer a full account of particulars and general entities here, I will assume that any general entity is repeatable and any particular is *non-repeatable* (see Harte, “Particular”, 97). Unlike a trope, then, a general

characteristic or property can belong to several things at once. For example, warm is a *such* because it is not the warmth of your fireplace or mine but belongs equally to both.

However, we should be cautious. For my description of a general characteristic echoes Aristotle's characterization of the "universal" (*katholou*) in *De interpretatione* 7: "By 'universal' (*katholou*) I mean what is by nature predicated of several things, and by 'particular' (*kath' hekaston*) what is not, e.g., human being is a universal and Kallias a particular" (17a39-b1). But it is controversial whether anything in Plato plays the role of an Aristotelian universal, not least because Platonic forms may not fit into Aristotle's dichotomy between particulars and universals (see, e.g., Harte, "Particular", 100-102).

A detailed discussion of this issue would lead us too far afield. On the one hand, it seems too strong to rule out *in principle* that certain passages in Plato presuppose the concept of a general characteristic. After all, I have just argued that the 'misread' passage requires some such concept in order to distinguish *suches* from *thises*.⁵ We may also note the similarities between the ways in which Timaeus' *suches* and Aristotle's universals are characterized. For example, Aristotle says that a universal is a "*toionde*" ("such") rather than a "*tode ti*" ("this something") (see, e.g., *Meta.* Z.13, 1039a1-2) which comes close to Timaeus' distinction between "*toiouton*" ("such") and "*touto*" ("that") or "*tode*" ("this"). Similarly, Aristotle notes that universals are akin to qualities (*Cat.* 5, 3b13-21; *Meta.* Z.13, 1038b26-27) which, as discussed, matches the characterization of a *such* as a "*hopoionoun ti*" ("what is of some sort"). It is not outlandish to infer that *suches* are general entities, like Aristotle's universals.

On the other hand, it would be hasty to conclude that Timaeus' *suches* just *are* Aristotelian universals. In *De interpretatione* 7, Aristotle relies on a contrast between a sensible particular, such as Kallias, and the universal human being, where the latter is predicated of, or belongs

⁵ Passages outside of the *Timaeus* where scholars have identified (immanent) general characteristics include *Phd.* 102b3-3a2 (see Gill, *Philosophos*, 25-26) and *Rep.* 478e7-79b10 (see Harte, "Particular", 100-101).

to, the former and other particular humans. But in the ‘misread’ passage, the *this* with which the *suches* are contrasted is the receptacle (49e7-50a2). Moreover, as I am about to argue, fundamentally, there are no sensible particulars according to Timaeus. Hence, a *such* cannot be a general characteristic in the sense that it is predicated of several particular objects, as Aristotle’s universals arguably are.

We need a different grasp, then, of what it is for a *such* to be a general characteristic. In section 4, we will see that the receptacle is differentiated into parts which can receive *suches* or images. I propose, then, that a *such* is a general characteristic because it can be received by different parts of the receptacle at once. For instance, different parts of the receptacle can be ignited at once by receiving the general characteristic fire (see 51b4-6). Thus, we can speak of ‘general characteristics’ in the *Timaeus* without importing the Aristotelian assumption that there are particulars of which those characteristics are predicated.

I have argued, then, that Timaeus’ *suches* are general characteristics, and I have indicated how we should think of a ‘general characteristic’ in this context. However, there is an important complication: Strictly, my conclusion applies only to what I will call ‘simple *suches*’. For on a closer reading of the ‘misread’ passage, it emerges that there are also entities composed from simple *suches*, that is, ‘complex *suches*’. Those complex *suches* are not themselves general characteristics but rather *bundles* of general characteristics.

At the outset of his account of the receptacle and images, Timaeus said that “we first have to puzzle through [the issues] about fire and what goes along with fire for the sake of that [i.e. the receptacle]” (49b1-2). Unfortunately, he does not make explicit what “what goes along with fire” refers to. Since the entities subsequently discussed are the elements, one might think that “what goes along with fire” is simply the other three elements, water, earth, and air (see 51b4-6). Thus, the *suches* would be only the elements (Broadie, *Divinity*, 187; Harte, “Receptacle”; Johansen, *Natural Philosophy*, 119-22). On the other hand, the receptacle is

that “in which [what comes to be (*to gignomenon*)] comes to be” (50d1). Hence, one might infer that Timaeus’ account concerns anything that comes to be in the receptacle, and thus *all* sensible entities (Buckels, “Trope Theory”, 11-12). Indeed, Timaeus seems to explicitly extend his treatment of fire to “everything that is subject to coming to be” (49e7).

Each of those interpretations seems partially right. Recall the end of the ‘misread’ passage:

[It is safest], then, on the one hand, to address only that in which each of them always appears as it comes to be, and from where they again perish, by using the name ‘that’ (*touto*) and ‘this’ (*tode*), and on the other hand, for what is of some sort (*hopoionoun ti*), warm or white or indeed any of the opposites, and all entities that are from them, to call none of them that [i.e., ‘that’ or ‘this’]. (49e7-50a4)

This implies that, as the second interpretation has it, anything which comes to be in the receptacle should be referred to only as ‘what is such’, not as ‘this’ or ‘that’, and hence, anything that comes to be is a *such*. But advocates of the first interpretation are right that elements play a special role. For there are *suches* on different levels: First, there are entities like fire and water and generally all qualities, as I argued above, such as warm or white. Those qualities are characterized as “opposites”, presumably because they come in pairs of contraries (see Taylor, *Timaeus*, 321). But second, there are also entities that are “from” the opposites, that is, presumably *composed* from them (see Gill, “Matter and Flux”, 35).

Since the opposites from which the other entities are composed are characteristics, the most plausible option for understanding composition here is in terms of a bundle theory: More complex *suches* are bundles of simpler *suches* (see Silverman, *Dialectic of Essence*, 280-81; Buckels, “Trope Theory”).⁶ Hence, only simple *suches* are themselves general characteristics, while complex *suches* are bundles of general characteristics. Even Socrates, then, is not a *this*

⁶ Similarly, McCabe (*Plato’s Individuals*, 141-45) argues that, in the *Theaetetus*, sensible particulars are bundles. But she thinks that, in the *Timaeus*, they are “slices” of layered properties (*Plato’s Individuals*, 170).

but a *such* because he is a bundle of general characteristics rather than a sensible particular as we ordinarily think of it.

One might object to this suggestion that a bundle of *suches* is not itself a *such*. After all, I characterized *suches* as general characteristics, but a bundle of general characteristics is not itself a general characteristic. In response, let me emphasize that, on the view presented here, there are two ways of being a *such*. A simple *such*, which has been our focus so far, is a *such* because it is a general characteristic. But a complex *such* is a *such* because it can be wholly analysed in terms of general characteristics. The view that complex *suches* are bundles does not undermine that claim. For fundamentally, a bundle is nothing over and above the characteristics of which it is a bundle. Rather, if a complex *such* is a bundle of general characteristics, fundamentally, it just is those general characteristics, and nothing more.⁷

One might object further that, as Harte (*Parts and Wholes*) has argued, Plato's favoured mereology is one of structured wholes which are more than just their parts. Hence, it may seem surprising that *Timaeus* is committed to a bundle theory that identifies the whole with its parts, and thus to a version of the view that composition is identity. But Harte (*Parts and Wholes*, ch. 2) argues also that, in some passages in the *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, and *Sophist*, Plato's speakers entertain a mereology of composition as identity. Effectively, I have argued that we should add the 'misread' passage in the *Timaeus* to that list. For if we take seriously the idea that all sensible 'objects' are *suches*, and yet want to allow for the composition of complex *suches*, our best option is to think of complex *suches* as bundles of characteristics (namely, of simple *suches*) which are nothing over and above those characteristics.

This reading also allows us to disarm a classic objection to Cherniss's interpretation, namely that it overgenerates ontological categories: Supposedly, general characteristics are a

⁷ For a contemporary statement of a similar bundle theory, see Van Cleve, "Bundle Theory", 102-4. He calls the ontology which accompanies that theory 'Platonic' but does not think anyone ever embraced the theory. If I am right, the theory is at least canvassed in the *Timaeus*. Many thanks to an anonymous referee for this pointer.

fourth sort of entity in addition to the official threefold ontology of receptacle, forms, and the phenomena that come to be in the receptacle (Zeyl, “Flux”, 134; Mohr, “Gold Analogy”, 249; Gill, “Matter and Flux”, 41). But the objection loses its force if the phenomena which come to be in the receptacle can be analysed entirely in terms of general characteristics. On the final analysis, there are no sensible particulars like Socrates: All supposed sensible particulars are bundles of general characteristics. Fundamentally, then, Timaeus’ revisionary ontology has room for only three sorts of entities: the receptacle, forms, and general characteristics (see Silverman, *Dialectic of Essence*, 261).

I have argued that, according to the ‘misread’ passage, all sensible entities are *suches*. Moreover, all *suches* are either themselves general characteristics (if they are simple *suches*) or bundles of general characteristics (if they are complex *suches*). Next, we will carry over our lessons about *suches* to the ontology of images. For images just are *suches*.

3. The Passage on Images (52b6-d1)

In the aftermath of the ‘misread’ passage, Timaeus discusses the receptacle in more detail and relates it to his earlier ontology of (simple) *suches* like fire: “[The receptacle’s] ignited part will every time appear as fire, its wettened part as water, and [other parts] as earth and air inasmuch as it receives imitations (*mimēmata*) of those” (51b4-6). *Suches* are characterized as “imitations” that are received by the receptacle (see 51a1-4, where Timaeus calls them “*aphomoiōmata*” or “resemblances), which raises the question what they are imitations of, and in particular, whether there are forms of *suches* (51b7-8).

Timaeus responds that there are forms of *suches* (51d2-e1; 50c4-5) and tells us more about the latter, now understood as imitations or *images* of forms (the textual divisions are mine):

(A) Because of this dreaming we do not prove able to wake up and distinguish all those things and others related to them, even concerning the sleepless and truly present nature, and to speak the truth, namely that, (B) for an image – since that very entity upon which (*eph' hōi*) it comes to be does not belong to [the image] itself, and it is always carried around as an appearance of something else – it is fitting for those reasons that it come to be in something else, in some way or another holding on to being, or else to be altogether nothing, (C) but what really is is helped by the principle that is true because of its accuracy, namely that, as long as the one is something (*allo*) and the other something else (*allo*), neither of the two ever comes to be in the other such that they become at once one and the same thing and two.⁸ (52b6-d1)

In (A), Timaeus refers back to his three-fold distinction between form, images, and the receptacle. But we do not understand those distinctions because “we say that it is necessary that everything that is be somewhere in some place and occupying some space” (52b3-5). In particular, then, we are confused about the distinction between forms and images because we think that both sorts of entities need to be in some place. In (B) and (C), Timaeus will explain that only images, but not forms, have to be, and can be, in a place.

Part (B) of the passage is beset by notorious issues of translation. The less problematic half of (B) says that an image always comes to be in something else and thereby “holds on to being” (52c4-5). The import of that claim is at least also existential: If an image were not in anything else, it would not exist. It is much less clear how we should understand the “since”-clause that provides the reason why an image must be in something else. The main difficulty is how we should read the expression “upon which” (*eph' hōi*) at 52c2. I took it locally, that is, Timaeus is interested in the relation between the image and that *upon* or *in* which it comes to be. This reading has some *prima facie* plausibility both because it rests on a standard way

⁸ ταῦτα δὴ πάντα καὶ τούτων ἄλλα ἀδελφὰ καὶ περὶ τὴν ἄπνον καὶ ἀληθῶς φύσιν ὑπάρχουσαν ὑπὸ ταύτης τῆς ὄνειρώξεως οὐ δυνατοὶ γιγνώμεθα ἐγερθέντες διοριζόμενοι τάληθες λέγειν, ὡς εἰκόνι μὲν, ἐπεὶ οὐδ' αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἐφ' ᾧ γέγονεν ἑαυτῆς ἐστίν, ἑτέρου δὲ τινος ἀεὶ φέρεται φάντασμα, διὰ ταῦτα ἐν ἑτέρῳ προσήκει τινὶ γίγνεσθαι, οὐσίας ἀμωσγέπως ἀντεχομένην, ἢ μηδὲν τὸ παράπαν αὐτὴν εἶναι, τῷ δὲ ὄντως ὄντι βοηθὸς ὁ δι' ἀκριβείας ἀληθῆς λόγος, ὡς ἕως ἄν τι τὸ μὲν ἄλλο ἦ, τὸ δὲ ἄλλο, οὐδέτερον ἐν οὐδέτερω ποτὲ γενόμενον ἐν ἅμα ταῦτον καὶ δύο γενήσεσθον.

of construing “*epi*” with the dative as meaning “upon” or “in”, and because the confusions noted in the advent of our passage concern the location of entities.

The local reading of “*epi*” goes back to Ficino (see Cherniss, “*Timaeus 52c2-5*”, 50-51) but lost its popularity in the wake of Cherniss’s criticisms. Cherniss (“*Timaeus 52c2-5*”, 51) raises two objections to the local reading: First, he points out that, everywhere else in our passage, Plato uses “*en*” (“in”), not “*epi*” to say that something is in something else. Second, he objects that, on the local interpretation, Timaeus’ claim would imply that “that in which entities other than images are *does* belong to those entities” which is false for forms.

Cherniss’s objections are not persuasive. Timaeus’ claim concerns only images, and it does not entail that entities other than images are in something that belongs to them. Hence, it is consistent with Timaeus’ claim that the forms are not in anything. Also, even if Plato typically uses “*en*” rather than “*epi*” to express location he may rely on a stylistic variant for once. What is more, despite the popularity of Cherniss’s own *linguistic* reading of “*epi*” (Gill, “Matter and Flux”; Pendrick, “Plato, *Timaeus 52c2-5*”), the evidence for it is not decisive.

Cherniss (“*Timaeus 52c2-5*”, 57-59) casts the expression in terms of signification: “since not even that very thing that an image signifies belongs to the image itself”. In support, he points to several passages, especially in the *Parmenides* (e.g., 147d1, d7), where “*onoma*” or “name” is construed with “*epi*” and the dative to say that the name signifies or refers to something. He then claims that, for Plato, names are images, and hence the same construal with “*epi*” and the dative is to be expected for images. But Cherniss would have to show that images are names, not that names are images. Otherwise, it is plausible that only certain images, namely, names or linguistic expressions, can signify entities, and that only in their case, “*epi*” with the dative may be construed in Cherniss’s way. Similarly, even if in *Rep. V*, 477c6–d5, “*epi*” in “*eph’ hōi*” means “about”, as Cherniss claims, this passage concerns mental capacities, and it is unclear whether images are about anything in the same sense.

Hence, there is no good evidence that, in the case of (non-linguistic) images, we should construe “*epi*” with the dative in terms of aboutness. This suggests that we should not give up on the local reading of “*epi*” lightly. But there is a *third* objection to the local reading, which is stronger than the ones offered by Cherniss: One might worry whether the local reading turns the “since” clause into a simple affirmation of the conclusion. For, on the local reading, Timaeus seems to both assume and conclude that images are in something else.

In response, we should look at Timaeus’ reasoning in (B) in more detail. Roughly, we can state the two-part “since” clause (S) and the conclusion concerning the image (I) as follows:

S: (i) That *epi* which an image comes to be does not belong to the image itself, and (ii) the image is an appearance of something else (*heterou*).

I: The image comes to be in something else (*heterōi*).

Notably, unlike (I), part (i) of (S) does not say that the image comes to be in “something else” (*heterōi*) but is formulated in terms of “belonging to”, or more literally: That *epi* which an image comes to be is not “of [the image] itself” (*heautēs*). Further, I suggest that we understand the claim about “something else” in (I) in terms of distinctness: An image comes to be in something distinct from itself. Hence, setting aside part (ii) of (S), Timaeus moves from a claim about belonging to an image to a claim about distinctness from the image. For the first part of the “since” clause says that an image comes to be in (*epi*) something that does not belong to it, whereas the conclusion says that it comes to be in something *distinct* from it.

How, then, should we understand the claim that what the image comes to be in does not belong to the image or is not “of the image itself”? One might think that what an image comes to be in is not “of” the image in the sense that it is not a *part* of it. But it is hard to see why Timaeus should be interested in the niche possibility that an image could come to be in

one of its parts. Rather, the force of his claim seems to be that the image does not come to be in itself *in any way*. Or for short, the image does not come to be in itself. But Timaeus presupposes that the image comes to be in something. Therefore, and this is conclusion (I), it comes to be in something distinct from the image. This inference is not an exciting one, but it *is* an inference. Moreover, nothing in the text suggests that we should expect an exciting inference. For Timaeus moves from the “since” clause to the conclusion without much ado.

But what about the second part of the “since” clause? If (i) by itself implies (I), as it does on the local reading of “*epi*”, part (ii) of (S) seems redundant. This objection is forceful if we think of (i) and (ii) as two premises that jointly entail (I). But we need not think of the two parts of the “since” clause in that way. Timaeus introduces (I) as follows: “it is fitting *for those reasons (dia tauta)* that [the image] come to be in something else” (52c3-4). “[F]or those reasons” refers back to the two parts of the “since” clause. But the formulation does not imply that (i) and (ii) are two premises that jointly entail (I). Equally plausibly, each of (i) and (ii) states an independent reason for accepting the conclusion.

In support of this reading, it seems that not only (i) but also (ii) implies (I) by itself, at least if we fill in certain background assumptions. Claim (ii) says that the image is an appearance of “something else” (*heterou*). Given my earlier suggestion, we should read “something else” in terms of distinctness: The image is an appearance of something distinct from it. But an appearance of something else must come to be in a ‘medium’ in which it appears, and that medium, too, is presumably distinct from the appearance.⁹ Hence, (ii) implies (I). Each part of the “since” clause, then, seems to state an independent reason for accepting the conclusion, and it should not faze us that (i) alone implies (I), as the local reading of “*epi*” has it.

⁹ See Timaeus’ account of the liver, where he seems to assume that “appearances” (φαντάσματα) need to be in some entity, in this case, the physical organ (71a6; 71c3; 71e8).

In the ensuing part (C) of the passage, Timaeus formulates a principle which further elucidates the conclusion from (B) that images must come to be in something else:

P: If the one is something (*allo*) and the other something else (*allo*), then neither of the two ever comes to be in the other such that they become at once one and the same thing and two.

As stated in the text, the consequent of P consists of two conjuncts: Neither of the two comes to be in the other, and they do not become at once one thing and two. But the second conjunct seems to be the consequence of the first (Cornford, *Cosmology*, 193; Zeyl, *Timaeus*). Thus, Timaeus states two conditionals: First, if the one is something and the other something else, then neither of the two ever comes to be in the other. Second, if neither of the two ever comes to be in the other, then they do not become at once one thing and two. Hence, if the one is something and the other something else, then they do not become at once one thing and two.

How should we understand the antecedent of the first conditional, namely that the one is “something” (*allo*) and the other “something else” (*allo*)? The force of the claim cannot be that if any two entities are distinct, neither will be in the other. For an image is distinct from the receptacle but still in the receptacle. Timaeus’ claim is more profitably understood in light of the ‘misread’ passage. There, he asked which of fire, water, and so forth “one can confidently and steadfastly affirm to be some this (*hotioun touto*) and not another (*allo*)” (49d1-2), and then went on to argue that none of them should be called ‘this’ because they are *suches*. Since images are *suches*, then, they are not *thises* that can be distinguished one from another as ‘this’ and ‘other’, or ‘one’ and ‘other’.

Similarly, the antecedent of the first conditional of P must concern not mere distinctness but, as we might say, the ‘self-subsistence’ of entities (where an entity is self-subsistent just

in case it can be correctly called a ‘this’). Therefore, the antecedent is false if at least one of the two entities is an image. On the other hand, if both are forms, or one a form and the other the receptacle, the antecedent is true because both forms and the receptacle are *thises*. Hence, according to P, no form ever comes to be in the receptacle. Moreover, given the second conditional of P, it follows that they do not become at once one thing and two.

By contrast, in line with the argument in (B), the principle in (C) leaves open whether an image can be in something distinct from itself. The principle also suggests that when an image is in the receptacle, they become at once one and two entities (although the principle does not entail that claim). This in turn helps understand the relation between images and the receptacle: When a part of the receptacle receives an image, we have both one thing (the ignited part of the receptacle) and two (a fiery part of the receptacle and the image of fire received by that part of the receptacle).

The more general conclusion from (B) and (C), then, is that images, unlike forms, are *immanent* in (parts of) the receptacle. But this raises the question how we are to understand the notion of immanence, and what picture of the receptacle emerges.

4. Immanence

Sometimes, at least in discussions of Plato, immanence is taken to be a relation borne by the immanent entity to a sensible particular (Fine, “Immanence”, 72; Gill, *Philosophos*, 25). But in the context of our section of the *Timaeus*, it would be difficult to construe the immanence of images in that way. For fundamentally, there are no sensible particulars. Moreover, images are not said to be in sensible particulars but in the receptacle. A more suitable understanding of ‘immanence’ emerges from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Δ.23. There, he says that one sense of

“having”, and hence one sense of “being in something” (1023a23-25), is “that in which something is present as in what receives [it], for example, bronze has the form of statue, and the body has illness” (1023a11-13). Similarly, in the *Timaeus*, images are immanent in “what receives” them, namely, the receptacle.

But we have to tread carefully. For on one interpretation, the immanence of images in the receptacle revives a version of the ‘classic’ objection to Cherniss. According to this interpretation, the receptacle is a material substratum for images just as, in Aristotle, bronze is the substratum for the shape of statue (Zeyl, *Timaeus*, lxii-lxiii; Harte, “Receptacle”). In addition, as a material substratum, the receptacle *individuates* the entities it receives. Hence, even if images are general characteristics or properties, particulars enter the ontology after all, namely, as the products of the individuation of images (for example, as particular property instances). Thus, my interpretation still implies a fourfold ontology (receptacle, forms, images, particulars) rather than *Timaeus*’ professed threefold ontology.

But the interpretation of the receptacle as an individuating material substratum conflicts not only with my view of images but also with the rival views. First, it does not accord well with the object view. For if the receptacle is a material substratum for the image, this suggests that the receptacle and the images jointly compose particulars (Buckels, “Receptacle as Space”, 10-16). But in that case, it is not the images which are ordinary sensible particulars, as the object view has it, but rather the *composites* of receptacle and images. The combination of the object view of images with the claim that the receptacle is a substratum seems unstable.

The trope view of images may appear to be a better fit: Particular property instances or tropes (namely, images) are the products of individuation by the receptacle. But what are the general entities to be individuated here? Since, on the trope view, there are no general sensible characteristics, the only candidates seem to be forms (if we assume, for the sake of argument, that forms are general). But since forms cannot be *in* the receptacle, the receptacle

cannot individuate them. Hence, advocates of the trope view either have to posit general entities immanent in the receptacle that can be individuated by it, or they must hold that the receptacle does not play any individuating role. On the first option, the trope view, too, implies a fourfold ontology rather than the requisite threefold one. But on the second option, the receptacle is not an *individuating* material substratum, contrary to the view assumed.

Thus, the interpretation of the receptacle as an individuating material substratum does not sit well with *any* of the three plausible views of Timaeus' ontology of images, not only mine.¹⁰ This suggests that we should reject this interpretation of the receptacle. In turn, the revived version of the 'classic' objection, which was based on the interpretation of the receptacle as an individuating material substratum, loses its force.

As for the receptacle, one could hold that it is a material substratum that does *not* individuate the entities it receives. This thought is not absurd: On a common view of Aristotle's forms, they are immanent universals that are not further individuated into particular forms. Moreover, unlike Aristotle, one could deny that the material substratum and the entity it receives compose a further entity (namely, a particular object). Whatever the merits of this interpretation of the receptacle, it does not raise the spectre of the 'classic' objection since it abandons the thought that the receptacle plays an individuating role.

Alternatively, one could drop the view of the receptacle as a material substratum. There are two options: On the first, the receptacle is a *space* that is like a mirror upon which images come to be (Buckels, "Receptacle as Space"; Gill, "Matter and Flux"; Lee, "Image"; for criticisms, see Kung, "Mirror"). On the second option, the receptacle is "a set of potentialities that allows for the development of a geometrical and physical space" (Sattler, "Plato's Receptacle", 160). According to Sattler ("Plato's Receptacle", 189-94), these potentialities

¹⁰ Moreover, even if there are two notions of the receptacle, namely, receptacle-as-matter and receptacle-as-space (Miller, *Third Kind*), the former will still generate the same difficulties.

are actualized by the reception of images of (geometric) forms. Hence, on either view, the receptacle insofar as it has received images is an actual space in which images appear.

Depending on one's view about images, one will spell out the details of the 'spatial' interpretation of the receptacle differently. For instance, if one holds the object view of images, one can argue that the receptacle "allows the elements as images of the Forms to *become* sensible bodies" (Sattler, "Plato's Receptacle", 167; my italics). But we have seen reasons to resist that reading: On the object view, images are supposed to *be*, not to become, sensible objects. Or else, if images are distinct from sensible objects, and the former come to be the latter, the object view implies a fourfold ontology of forms, receptacle, images, and sensible objects. Instead, then, one may be inclined to opt for a weaker reading on which images simply inhere in the space without the reception of images generating any further entities. But this view seems compatible with thinking of images as general entities.

More could be said about the 'material' and 'spatial' interpretations of the receptacle. But for us, there is a more pressing question: How exactly should we understand the generality of images? Earlier, I suggested that (simple) *suches* or images are general characteristics, not tropes, because they are repeatable, or more precisely, because they can be received by several parts of the receptacle at once. This option is available because Timaeus explicitly acknowledges that the receptacle has parts (51b4-6). For example, on my reading, various parts of the receptacle can be ignited by receiving a single, general image of fire.

But this suggestion invites the further query how the receptacle can be differentiated into parts. On one view, the differentiation of the receptacle is brought about by the reception of images and thus is not an "intrinsic characteristic" of the receptacle (Johansen, *Natural Philosophy*, 131; see also Harte, "Receptacle", 137-38). If this is right, one might again wonder whether images can be general. For the differentiation of the receptacle by images

into parts seems to presuppose that images are determinate particulars which can differentiate the indeterminate receptacle.

However, there is no indication in Timaeus' characterization of the receptacle that it cannot by itself have any mereological structure. He says that the receptacle "does not ever take on any shape that is similar to any of the entities that enter it in any manner or way" (50c1-2), and that therefore "we should not call it 'earth' or 'air' or 'fire' or 'water'" (51a5-6). The receptacle, then, is by itself indeterminate relative to the *kinds* of entity it receives. But Timaeus does not extend this point to the mereological structure of the receptacle. On the contrary, he is happy to invoke the parts of the receptacle when he says that "its ignited part will every time appear as fire, its wettened part as water, and [other parts] as earth and air inasmuch as it receives imitations of those" (51b4-6). The receptacle is not by itself fiery or watery, but it has parts that can appear fiery or watery when the relevant images are received.¹¹ But if the receptacle has, by itself, a mereological structure, it does not depend on the images received to be differentiated into parts. Hence, we can rely on the mereological structure of the receptacle to spell out the generality of images: Images are general characteristics because they can be received by several parts of the receptacle at once.

More precisely, if we map the distinction between simple and complex *suches* onto the ontology of images, simple *suches* or images are general characteristics that can be received by different parts of the receptacle. But we can also see how Timaeus might account for complex *suches* or images, if the latter are bundles: When several simple *suches* or images are received by a single part of the receptacle, they form a bundle and thus a complex *such* or image. On this reconstruction, all images, and hence all sensible entities, are either general characteristics immanent in the receptacle or bundles of such characteristics.

¹¹ Even if the receptacle has a basic mereological structure, it may not be, by itself, a full-blown (geometrical) space if it lacks, for instance, dimensionality (see Sattler, "Plato's Receptacle", 190).

But this is not the end of the story. For Timaeus constructs the (physical) elements from triangles. Hence, entities like fire are not simple *suches* after all, or so I will argue next.

5. Triangles and Images

After Timaeus has concluded his account of forms, images, and the receptacle, he says by way of summary: “There are being [i.e., forms], coming-to-be [i.e., images], and space [i.e., the receptacle], three in three ways, *even (kai) before the cosmos came to be*” (52d3-4, my italics). The last qualification could be taken to suggest that the account of *suches* and images given previously concerned only the pre-cosmos, that is, the world before it was ordered by the god (Johansen, *Natural Philosophy*, 125-27). But Timaeus does not say that the ontology he has outlined so far concerns *only* the pre-cosmos. Rather, he says that it is in place *even* in the pre-cosmos. Hence, the ontology of forms, images, and the receptacle is in place both before the intervention of the god and afterwards.

In the pre-cosmos, there were mere “traces” of the physical elements (53b2) which Timaeus’ god “configured (*dieschēmatisato*) by forms and numbers” (53b4-5). The god first constructs the five regular geometric solids and then analyses the four physical elements in terms of them: The tetrahedron is the “element and seed of fire” (56b5), the octahedron of air, the icosahedron of water (56b3-6), and the cube of earth (55d8).¹² The geometric solids, then, are elements or seeds of the physical elements, or for short, *constituents* of them, that are not visible individually but only in “bulks” (*onkous*) (56b7-c3). Next, Timaeus claims that only two elementary triangles are required for the construction of the solids and hence the physical elements: The faces of the cube are constructed from four isosceles right triangles and the

¹² The fifth solid, namely, the dodecahedron, is used for the universe as a whole (55c4-6).

faces of the other solids from six half equilateral triangles (54b4-5; for a detailed discussion, see Artmann & Schäfer, “Fairest Triangles”). How does the ontology of images fit the world before the construction of elements from triangles and afterwards?

Let us begin with the pre-cosmos. The receptacle receives ‘the shapes of earth and air’ and the other elements (52d5-6), but “because it is filled neither with similar capacities nor with balanced ones, it is not in balance in any part of it” (52e1-3). Instead, the receptacle is in commotion like a winnowing basket (52e5-53a2) where the receptacle both shakes its content and is shaken by the content (52e3-5). Still, even in the pre-cosmos, the content is distributed by similarity (53a4-6). That content is not the physical elements but only “traces” (*ichnē*) of them (53b2) because the elements still await geometric construction. Since the threefold ontological scheme is in place, and traces are in the receptacle, they must be images.

That said, contrary to the ‘misread’ passage, there does not seem to be any compositional complexity in the pre-cosmic ontology of images. According to the ‘misread’ passage, there were simple *suches* or images, in particular, the elements, which composed complex ones. If elements themselves are composed from triangles, presumably they turn out not to be simple after all (see below). Moreover, Timaeus explicitly denies that, in the pre-cosmos, there are elements, properly speaking, precisely because they have not been constructed yet. A fortiori, nothing can be composed from the elements, and presumably traces of elements cannot serve as the base for the composition of complex images. Hence, even though there are *suches* or images in the pre-cosmos, there is no compositional complexity in the ontology of images.¹³

The opposite modification is required by the *cosmic* setting where we get more compositional complexity than it seemed in the ‘misread’ passage. For if the physical elements are themselves constructed from elementary triangles, they are complex, and it is now the elementary triangles that have emerged as simple. But the consequence of that

¹³ Although, in the pre-cosmos, there can be chance combinations of traces (69b5-8).

complication is *not* that Timaeus' ontology of images is undermined. If the receptacle receives fire, then it receives its constituent tetrahedra and the elementary triangles that make up the latter. Hence, triangles, too, are images of forms. Indeed, if triangles compose everything else, they are simple images and hence must be immanent characteristics. The gold analogy, which used the triangle imprinted on gold as an example of an image received by the receptacle, was already suggestive of that application (Buckels, "Trope Theory", 17).

One could object to this reading that, if triangles and elements are general characteristics, it is hard to explain the construction of physical elements from triangles. We already encountered a version of this objection when we considered the rejoinder that the receptacle receives "all the bodies" (50b6). For however we understand the process of constructing three-dimensional solids from two-dimensional triangles, and however we make sense of the identification of geometric solids with constituents of physical elements, Timaeus' god seems to build objects (solids) from objects (triangles), not bundles from characteristics.

Unsurprisingly, my response echoes the one given previously. The linguistic regimentation from the 'misread' passage is hard to follow because we, including Timaeus, are used to speaking about the world as if there were objects. But the 'misread' passage yielded not only a stricture against such talk but also a recipe for accommodating it: Whenever we fall back into object-laden talk, we should remember that the entities we are talking about are images, and hence general characteristics or bundles of them. Thus, the physical elements should also be analysed as bundles of simple *suches* – where the simple *suches* are now general geometric characteristics immanent in the receptacle. For instance, we might think of fire as a bundle of general characteristics that include the property *half equilateral triangle* and various compositional relations that are needed for the construction of a tetrahedron.

At this point, one could wonder whether we are still given an ontology of the image (*eikōn*). For it has turned out that (simple) images are general characteristics, or perhaps even worse,

general geometric characteristics. But one might think that images are like reflections in water and as such can come to be or pass away or undergo qualitative changes, and in this they seem to differ from general characteristics. However, like the similes which Timaeus uses to illustrate his threefold ontology, such as the gold analogy, his talk of ‘images’ serves as a springboard to a more abstract notion. For images are images *of forms*. But forms are not physical objects that are reflected in water, nor is the receptacle in which images come to be some sensible stuff. Similarly, the ‘image’ itself is not an image as we ordinarily think of it. Even if reflections in water can undergo change or a process of generation and perishing, an image of a form need not have those features.

But there is a further objection in the vicinity: Timaeus uses the construction of the physical elements to explain physical processes, including elemental transformations. For example, the pointed tetrahedra of fire cut up and dissolve earth (56d1-2). It may seem mysterious how such processes are explained if all sensible entities are, or consist of, general characteristics. If I am right about Timaeus’ account, the answer must be that, while images do not undergo change, they can be received by different parts of the receptacle at different times as some form ‘engenders’ an image with the receptacle (50d2-4). All phenomenal changes, then, have to be explained in terms of the reception of images by different parts of the receptacle. This does not require images themselves to be changeable sensible entities but merely that they can be received by, and ejected from, the receptacle.

6. Conclusion

Timaeus’ ontology, as I presented it, may seem not only revisionary but also convoluted. An Aristotelian might say that forms can be axed from the ontology: After all, we already have

immanent general characteristics, and what more do we need? A hard-core Platonist might think that, in the fundamental ontology, one could do away with immanent general characteristics and stick to forms alone. Whatever the philosophical merits of such alternatives, by the lights of the *Timaeus* they are unacceptable. If we are to give an ontology of the sensible world, immanent general characteristics are required in addition to forms because only the former can be received by the receptacle. But an ontology of immanent general characteristics without forms is not an option either. For immanent general characteristics are images *of forms*, and they could not exist without them. Hence both sorts of entity must enter the threefold ontology of the *Timaeus* alongside the receptacle.

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