

Timaeus 48e-52d and the Third Man Argument

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In this paper I examine a much discussed passage of the *Timaeus*. This passage contains one of the most important descriptions of Plato's ontology to be found in all the dialogues. The ontological scheme there described differs from that presented in the middle Platonic dialogues in that a third sort of entity, the Receptacle or space, is added to the two classes of things familiar to readers of the *Phaedo* and *Republic*: Being (i.e. the Forms) and Becoming (the phenomenal world). The introduction of the Receptacle into Plato's ontology enables Plato to clarify the relation between the orders of Being and Becoming in a way not otherwise possible. When the relation between the Forms and their phenomenal counterparts has been clarified, I shall argue, it becomes clear that the Theory of Forms as presented in the *Timaeus* is in fact a coherent metaphysical theory, one which is not susceptible to the Third Man Argument. This fact in turn bears (although somewhat indirectly) on the vexed question of the place of the *Timaeus* in the chronology of Plato's works.

I shall proceed in the following way. First, I shall attempt to place this passage of the dialogue in its proper context. Second, I shall undertake a detailed explication of the passage itself. Third, I shall indicate what the import of the passage is for Plato's ontology. Fourth, I shall attempt to show how Plato's ontology, thus described, makes the Third Man idle. Fifth, I shall address briefly the chronological issue.

I. The Enterprise of the *Timaeus*

The *Timaeus* is not primarily an exercise in metaphysics. No Platonic dialogue is, except the *Parmenides*. In the *Timaeus*, as in the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Sophist*, and other dialogues in which there is considerable metaphysical content, metaphysical doctrines (including the Theory of Forms) are introduced to advance the discussion of other points. Thus, Plato's primary purpose in describing his ontology is not to give a clear account of that ontology for its own sake.¹

The *Timaeus* is an essay on cosmology. Its purpose is to explain the nature, and, if *Timaeus* is to be taken literally, the generation of the phenomenal world. That Plato would undertake such a task at all is somewhat surprising in light of the general attitude of disparagement he had expressed in the middle dialogues concerning the phenomenal world (cf. e.g. *Phdo.* 65a-68b, *Rep.* VII, 507a-509c). The primary reason for Plato's denigration of the phenomenal world in those dialogues seems to have been his view that they were in constant flux, and thus were unworthy to be objects of knowledge (Aristotle, *Metaph.* A. 6, 987a32 ff., M.4, 1078b9 ff.; Plato, *Phdo.* 78b-80b). Plato does not seem to have adhered to the radical Heraclitean view criticized in the *Theaetetus* that no aspect of the phenomenal world is even describable; he does, after all, think that knowledge of the Forms enables one to discriminate more accurately among phenomena (cf.

1 This may reflect Plato's view that the first principles of his philosophy are incapable of being put down in a treatise (*VIIth Letter*, 341b-e); at any rate, it is a feature of his writing that makes the extrapolation from it of his metaphysics so controversial and difficult.

Rep. VII, 520b-d). He does, however, seem to have the opinion that the phenomenal world is unworthy of the serious attention of the philosopher.

In order for the phenomenal world to be 'rehabilitated' to the extent that it can serve as a suitable object for philosophical study, the instability of that world must be diminished, or the effects of that instability mitigated. Plato in part effects this rehabilitation by his introduction of the Receptacle. His rehabilitation of the phenomenal world does not involve, for the most part, any repudiation of doctrines propounded earlier. He retains the view that the phenomenal world is inferior to the intelligible in epistemic and ontological status, and that it is derived from the intelligible world as an image is from its original (*Tim.* 27d-29d). Nor does he depart from the view that all of the entities within the phenomenal world are unstable, as we shall see. By the addition of the Receptacle to his ontology, however, Plato gives phenomena a stable foundation in which to occur; and the effect of this, together with the reiteration of his claim that phenomena derive their definiteness of nature from the Forms in which they participate, is to give the phenomenal world a stability, and therefore a respectability, it had not previously held in Plato's eyes.²

It would be misleading, therefore, to suggest that Plato introduced the Receptacle into his ontology for the purpose of showing the immunity of that ontology to the Third Man. My claim is merely that this is an effect of that introduction, whether or not Plato intended it

2 In part, Plato's rehabilitation of the phenomenal world is the result of a change in attitude, rather than doctrine. His description of the cosmos as the best of the things that have come to be (29a); as complete, comprehensive, unified, and free from illness and age (30c-33a); as a living being endowed with soul and reason (30b-c); as everlasting in its existence (38b-c) – all these are indications of the higher value Plato places on the phenomenal world in the *Timaeus* than in earlier works. Also indicative of this change is the high praise he accords to vision (47a-b) and the repeated use he makes of mathematics, which for him is a paradigm case of rational knowledge, in explaining the cosmos (cf. esp. 31b-32c, 35b-36d, and 53c-57d). To what extent this shift in attitude is the result of the introduction of a divine creator of the cosmos I do not know; but certainly Plato's earlier contempt for the phenomenal world would be difficult to reconcile with his expressed view in the *Timaeus* that the cosmos is the product of an intelligent and benevolent craftsman-deity.

to be. As the claim I wish to challenge is the claim that the Theory of Forms as presented in the *Timaeus* is in fact refuted by the Third Man, it will be sufficient for my purposes to show that it is not; it will not prove necessary to speculate on Plato's unexpressed motives or intentions.

II. *Timaeus* 48e-52d

I turn now to the passage for which I have promised so much. I have stated that the introduction of the Receptacle clarifies the nature of Plato's ontology. It must not be assumed, however, that every aspect of that ontology is clarified. In the passage itself, Plato admits that the nature of the Receptacle is 'difficult and obscure' (49a3), and that phenomena, copies of the Forms, are 'modelled from them in some marvelous and hard-to-express way' (50c5-6). From the latter comment, one could reasonably infer that Plato had not resolved the problem, raised in the *Parmenides*, of the nature of participation.³ Nonetheless, the passage does offer considerable insight into the nature of the Forms and their relation to their phenomenal participants.

As *Timaeus* explains it, the cosmos is the product of the interaction of two forces: Reason (in the person of the Demiurge) and Necessity. Necessity is essentially disordered; the cosmic order is produced by Reason's persuasion of Necessity to follow the right path (47e-48a). To explain the nature of Necessity, Plato embarks on a critique of the four traditional 'elements' of Greek cosmology: earth, air, fire, and water.⁴ These 'elements' are not, as others had assumed, the first prin-

3 *Philebus* 15b-c likewise suggests that the nature of participation remains unresolved in the later dialogues.

4 The relevance of the discussion of the 'elements' to the explication of the nature of Necessity is not immediately obvious. Necessity is the force in nature that opposes or restricts the plans of the Demiurge. Plato conceives this role as analogous to that of a somewhat refractory material on which an ordinary craftsman works. If the four 'elements' were in Plato's view the ultimate

ciples or 'letters' of the cosmic order; they are in fact not even as basic as syllables (48b-c). The so-called 'elements' may be analyzed into more elementary components, which turn out to be the Receptacle and the images of the Forms that are reflected in it. That the 'elements' are not truly elementary is shown by the fact that they appear to transmute into one another (49b-c; it turns out at 54b-c that only three of the four actually do so, on Plato's theory); in any event, they are no less transitory and ephemeral in their existence than the more complex phenomena supposedly composed from them. They, like other phenomena, are in flux, and are thus unsuited to be the stable, elementary underpinning of the phenomenal world which Plato requires. For this purpose the Receptacle is required.

A. *Becoming*

Plato introduces the problem of the instability of the 'elements' by asking which of them is properly called 'water' rather than 'fire' or something else, or, in general, how they are to be spoken of 'so as to use language that is trustworthy and constant' (49b5). The ordinary way of speaking about the 'elements' turns out to be untrustworthy and inconstant, and Plato offers an alternative:

Since none of these ever appear to be the same, who would not be ashamed of himself for confidently affirming of any of them that it is "this," whatever it may be, and not something else? It is not possible, but by far the safest course is for us to propose to speak thus concerning these: whenever we see something coming to be at one time or another,⁵ such as fire, to address fire

material with which the Demiurge works, they would be suited to play this role; their unsuitability in his eyes occasions the resulting search for more elementary components of the cosmos, in the course of which the Receptacle is introduced.

5 As E.N. Lee notes in 'On Plato's *Timaeus*, 49D4-E7,' *American Journal of Philology*, 88 (1967) 14, the translation proposed by H.F. Cherniss, 'at different times in different places,' in 'A Much Misread Passage of the *Timaeus* (*Timaeus* 49C7-50B5),' *American Journal of Philology*, 75 (1954) 114, is unwarranted.

on each occasion⁶ not as "this," but as "the such";⁷ nor to address water as "this," but always as "the such"; nor to address anything as if it had any stability, of all the things we indicate by using the words "that" and "this," believing that we are pointing out something; for they⁸ flee, not awaiting the utterance of "that" or "this" or "to this,"⁹ or any utterance which in-

This passage is difficult, and translations proposed for it have varied widely. I have generally opted for the traditional reading (given by Cornford and, with variations, by others) to the radically different interpretation proposed by Cherniss and followed, with reservations, by Lee. Both readings have their awkward moments, but neither seems to be impossible Greek; therefore, my objections to the Cherniss reading are primarily philosophical and not philological.

It is well known that the Cherniss reading commits Plato to a four-fold division of entities (Forms, Receptacle, immanent character, and instance of immanent character), whereas Plato insists in the passage on a three-fold classification (51e-52b; cf. K.W. Mills, 'Some aspects of Plato's Theory of Forms: *Timaeus* 49c ff.,' *Phronesis*, 13 [1968] 153-54, 170).

Moreover, Cherniss explicitly claims it as a consequence of his interpretation that Phenomena cannot be distinctively denominated, because no part of the phenomenal flux is distinguishable from any other' (128). According to this view, the immanent characters can be named, but not their instances. Against this view it should be pointed out that Plato does not make anything of the distinction between immanent character and instance (cf. p. 130, below); that he shows in *Tim.* 51b that he has no difficulty naming instances of immanent characters; and that such a view would make the wisdom of the philosopher-king of little value in the cave (cf. p. 124-5, above) and the distinction between right and wrong opinion at least problematic, at any rate as regards particulars.

6 *'hekastote'* (49d5-6) parallels *'aei'* 49d4, 7) and contrasts with *'mēde ... pote'* (49d7). Cherniss (115) finds this redundant, but we must remember that Plato delights in pleonasm and parallel construction.

7 As Alex Mourelatos has pointed out to me, *'to toiouton'* has a demonstrative as well as a relative use, and it is the former that is found here. There is no corresponding demonstrative use of 'such' in English; hence, the translation is somewhat awkward.

8 Cherniss (117) thinks the subject of *'pheugei'* is *'touto.'* Lee thinks the subject is 'simply one of those individual things which we so often point at and talk about' (6). I do not wish to limit the subject to individuals; otherwise, I concur with Lee. There is no grammatical difficulty in taking *'hosa'* (49d7) as the antecedent of *'pheugei,'* since neuter plurals regularly take singular verbs.

9 Many commentators have noted the difficulty of giving a sense to *'kai tēn tōide'*

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dicates that they are stable. But we should not call any of these things by these names;¹⁰ rather, concerning each and all of them we should call them thus:¹¹ "the such, always the same as it is borne about"; and in particular we should call fire¹² "the such throughout all time," and [we should speak thus concerning] all that has generation. (49c7-e7)

Plato apparently regards the terms 'this' and 'that' as carrying the connotations of stability or permanence; he thinks that they are inappropriate for the so-called elements because these are unstable and impermanent. He coins the phrase '*to toiouton*,' 'the such,' for all entities of this type. It is not clear from the passage quoted what this phrase means, but it seems safe to infer that it does not carry the connotations of permanence Plato attributes to 'this' and 'that.'

The scope of '*to toiouton*' is quite broad. It is not restricted to the 'elements,' which had up to this point been the subjects under discussion; rather, it applies to 'all that has generation,' everything in the realm of Becoming.

Plato applies the phrase both to individual instances of, e.g., fire,

(49e3), and some have simply not translated it. I take it that Plato's point is that inflections of '*tode*' and not just the nominative singular imply stability; thus he includes a dative singular as an example. The sense of the phrase is of secondary importance.

10 This is the reading of F.M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1937; reprint ed., New York: Liberal Arts Press 1957), 179. A.E. Taylor, in *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1928), 318, notes a parallel between this passage and 50a4, which supports this reading.

11 Cherniss (120-3) places heavy emphasis on the meaning of '*houtōi*' and chides translators who omit it. I have rendered it 'thus,' and have altered the word order so that it refers to a phrase that follows it, as 'thus' ordinarily does in English, rather than a phrase which precedes it, as '*houtōi*' does in Greek. I take it that the adverb modifies '*kalein*' and refers to the phrase, '*to de toiouton ... homoion*' (49e5).

12 With Norman Gulley, in *The Interpretation of Plato, Timaeus 49 D-E*, *American Journal of Philology*, 81 (1960) 54, I take it that '*to toiouton*' is predicated of 'fire,' and not the reverse.

and to the immanent character¹³ of fire itself. Timaeus says that we should address the fire that comes into being at one time or another as 'the such' (49d4-6); later he says that we should call fire 'the such throughout all time' (e6-7). It seems natural to take the first reference to be to an instance of fire and the second to be to the immanent character or natural kind.

Although Plato distinguishes in the passage between instances of an immanent character and the character itself, he makes no use of the distinction, and, in fact, ignores it when he groups both sorts of things together in the category of Becoming. The reason for this is perhaps that the similarities between these two entities are more significant to him than the differences. Both the instances and the character are phenomenal entities, which has always been the hallmark of Becoming for Plato; in addition, both are, in his eyes, unstable. The instances come into being and cease to be, the characters are always 'borne about' ('*peripheromenon*,' 49e5; cf. '*pephorēmenon*,' 52a6), are always 'entering and exiting' the Receptacle (50c4-5). Such instability is of course an instability of location, not of characteristic; Plato does not suggest that the immanent character itself changes its essential nature.¹⁴

13 I borrow this term from Gregory Vlastos, 'Reasons and Causes in the *Phaedo*,' in Vlastos, ed., *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1971), 140. I do not think, as Vlastos does, that the distinction between the Form and immanent character is to be found in the *Phaedo*, but it seems clearly to be present in the *Timaeus*.

It may not seem clear how the instances of the immanent character are related to the character itself (I would suggest that it is as a part to a whole, or as an individual member of a class to the totality of members) or why Plato feels he needs both the character and its instances. The instance of an immanent character seems to be the result of the interaction of the character with a particular region or portion of the Receptacle; Plato apparently thinks that this interaction particularizes not just the complex entity, area of space + character, but the portion of the character itself. In any case, the distinction between immanent character and instance (of which, as I note in the body of the paper, Plato makes little use) seems to have a parallel in the distinction between individual and universal accidents, which the Scholastic tradition traced back (whether rightly or wrongly is a matter of dispute) to Aristotle's *Categories*.

14 Cherniss, 128-30

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What the passage quoted tells us, then, is that everything that is generated, all Becoming, is to be called not 'this' but 'the such.' When Timaeus describes Becoming in detail in his final summary of his ontology in this passage (at 51e-52d), he supplements this linguistic remark with a characterization of the category's members which is basically the same as that given in the middle dialogues. A thing that becomes is:

that which has the same name [as the Form] and is like it; sensible, generated, always borne about, and coming to be in some place and perishing again back out of it, grasped by opinion with the aid of sensory experience ... (52a4-7)

We have here stated the doctrines of homonymy and resemblance between Form and phenomenon, doctrines which have made the Third Man Argument seem a plausible refutation of the Theory of Forms. Also stated, however, is a new characteristic of phenomena, which is the result of the introduction of the Receptacle: things that become do their becoming *in space*, that is, in the Receptacle. The significance of this point I shall discuss below, once I have dealt with the other two categories of Plato's ontology, the Receptacle and the Forms.

B. The Receptacle

The above account has revealed the members of the category of Becoming to be, as any reader of the middle dialogues would expect, unstable and ephemeral entities; they are, for that reason, not to be referred to as 'thisses.' The Receptacle, in contrast, *is* to be called 'this':

that in which each of these things appears, coming to be, and from which again it perishes — that alone we should address using the words "this" and "that"; but that which is of any nature whatsoever — hot or white or any of the opposites whatsoever, and anything which is derived from them — we ought never to call that by any of these terms. (49e7-50a4)

The applicability of 'this' and 'that' to the Receptacle is due to its complete stability and freedom from essential change, a point Plato makes in several different ways.

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First, he uses an analogy to explain the contrast between the Receptacle and Becoming. Consider a man molding a lump of gold continually into different shapes:

if someone should point to one of them and ask, "what is it?", by far the safest thing with respect to the truth would be to say that it is gold; concerning the triangle and whatever other shapes came to be, these should not be spoken of as *beings*, for they change even as they are spoken of. But if these should be willing to accept from someone even the term "the such" with certainty, he should be content. (50a7-b5)

The gold in the example plays the role of the Receptacle; the shapes, that of Becoming. When Plato denies that the shapes should be referred to as beings (*onta*, 50b3), since they are in constant change, he is using 'beings' as he uses 'this': to imply stability. This sense of 'being' is the same that is found in the Platonic contrast between Being and Becoming (cf. *Tim.* 27d-28a). When he denies that the shapes (and thus phenomena) are 'beings,' however, he implies that the gold (and thus the Receptacle) may be so-called, or at the very least accords to the Receptacle a stability previously only to the Forms.

The gold analogy is in one respect misleading, for it suggests that the Receptacle is the matter out of which the phenomena are made, and that it successively becomes triangular, round, etc. Yet this is too Aristotelian a view; as Cornford points out:

There is no justification for calling the Receptacle "matter" — a term not used by Plato. The Receptacle is not that "out of which" (*ex hou*) things are made; it is that "in which" (*en hōi*) qualities appear, as fleeting images are seen *in* a mirror.¹⁵

Aristotelian matter 'becomes,' is transformed into, the objects of the phenomenal world; but Plato insists that the Receptacle only appears to change, or at most changes in its accidental characteristics; in its essential nature it is impassive:

15 Cornford, 181

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It must always be called "the same"; from its own nature it never departs at all — for it always receives all things, and never at any time in any way ever takes on any form similar to the things that enter it; for it is by nature a place for every impression, changed and formed by the things that enter it, and it appears because of them different at different times. (50b6-c4)

In its essential nature the Receptacle is *characterless*; Plato believes it must be so, in order for it to be able to reflect every sort of phenomenon that appears in it. He makes this point by comparing the Receptacle to an odorless base for perfumes and a smooth surface prepared for receiving imprints (50e-51a). The ideal perfume base has no odor of its own, since it must take on the odor of the ingredient added to it; likewise, the ideal surface for drawing must have no figures already drawn on it. As the Receptacle is to receive *all* phenomena, it must in itself have no phenomenal properties. Thus, although it is a part of the phenomenal world, the Receptacle is not itself a phenomenal entity. It is for this reason that Plato describes it as 'grasped without sense experience by a certain bastard reasoning' (52b2). It is important to realize that, as Plato has already described all phenomena as unstable, he is required by logic to take the Receptacle, which serves as the stable underpinning of phenomena, the 'mirror' in which they appear, as non-phenomenal.

It is the Receptacle that takes over the job performed in traditional cosmologies by the four 'elements':

the mother and Receptacle of visible Becoming and of sensible Becoming in general we ought to call neither earth nor air nor water nor anything which comes to be from these nor from which these come to be; but we shall not lie if we call it a certain invisible kind, and amorphous, all receiving, partaking of the intelligible in some very puzzling and hard-to-grasp way. Insofar as it is possible from what has been said before to arrive at its nature, one would speak of it most correctly as follows: that part of it which is inflamed appears on each occasion as fire; that part which is moistened, as water; and [part appears as] earth and air to the extent that it receives copies of these. (51a4-b6)

The Receptacle thus functions as a substratum, a substance, in which everything phenomenal appears. It is suited to perform this task by the very features of its nature which we have seen Plato stress: its stability and freedom from change, and its essential characterlessness.

C. Form

Only when the Receptacle has been distinguished from Becoming and has been shown to be the underpinning of Becoming does Plato mention the third category of things in his ontology, the Forms. Here, as in the *Parmenides* and *Philebus*, Plato raises the question whether there are any such things at all:

Is there any such thing as Fire just in itself, or any of the things of which we are always speaking thus: that each of them is just in itself? Or do those things at which we look, and all other things which we perceive by the body, alone have this sort of reality, but there is nothing else besides these in any way at any time? Is it in vain on each occasion that we say there is a certain intelligible Form of each thing, and is this nothing but a word? (51b7-c5)

If the question links the *Timaeus* to Plato's later dialogues by indicating that Plato is aware of the problematic nature of the Forms' existence, his resolution of the problem recalls the *Republic*: there must be Forms, since true opinion and reason differ (51d-e). The answer, like the treatment of the Forms in general in this passage, is perfunctory. Plato's excuse for this is that a long digression would be out of place at this point in the dialogue (51c-d).

As in the case of his description of Becoming, Plato's account of the Forms both reasserts familiar claims from the middle dialogues and adds some important new information about them:

we must agree that there exist: (1) the Form, which remains in the same state, ungenerated and imperishable, neither receiving into itself anything else from elsewhere nor itself going anywhere into another, invisible and in general imperceptible to sense, that which it is the task of intelligence to examine ... (51e6-52a4)

That the Forms are unchangeable, eternal, imperceptible, and intelligible is hardly news; but what does it mean to say that the Forms do not receive anything into themselves or go out into another thing?

It seems clear that Plato uses this phrase to distinguish the Forms both from Becoming and from the Receptacle. The Receptacle, in contrast to the Forms, does receive other things (namely, the images of the

Forms which are the elements of Becoming); phenomena, in contrast to the Forms, go out into (exist in) another thing (namely the Receptacle). Presumably, the Receptacle shares with the Forms the property of not existing in something else; and Becoming must share with the Forms the property of not receiving something else into itself. In terms of these two properties, therefore, the relations between the three sorts of thing in Plato's ontology can be specified: the Receptacle in essence is a receiver of entities which is not itself received in another entity; phenomena are in essence received and not receiving; and Forms are neither receptive nor received by another.

This distinction between receiving and being received has existential implications, as Plato points out. Since neither the Forms nor the Receptacle exists in another thing, both are independent entities; the phenomenal image of the Form, which exists in the Receptacle, is dependent on the Receptacle for its very being:

for an image, on the one hand, since not even that itself in dependence on which¹⁶ it has come to be belongs to it, but it is always borne along as the image of another, for these reasons it is fitting that it should come to be in something else, clinging to being in some way, or it would be nothing at all.
(52c2-5)

The point of this rather obscure remark is this. Plato has always described phenomena as dependent for their nature on the Forms in which they participate (cf. e.g. *Phdo.* 100b-c). Now, thanks to the addition of the Receptacle, he is able to point out that they are likewise dependent on something other than themselves for their existence. Just as a mirror image has the characteristics it does because of the particular thing it is an image of, so it exists at all because there is a mirror for it to exist in.

Plato identifies the Receptacle with space (52a8). In saying that the Forms do not exist in something else, such as the Receptacle, he rules out the possibility that they exist in space. This is a point he makes ex-

16 Cornford discusses the phrase, '*eph' hōi*,' in a note (370-1); but he fails to consider this sense of '*epi*' with the dative, which is well attested: cf. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1940), s.v. '*epi*,' B. 1. g.

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plicitly, if somewhat indirectly, in 52c-d. We think, he says, that everything that exists must exist in space, but this is erroneous, a product of a dream-like state of consciousness. Images, it is true, must exist in space; however, 'in the case of the true reality, ... as long as something is one thing and another thing another, neither will ever come to be in the other ...' (52c5-d1). If we take it that 'true reality' is contrasted with Becoming, and that it has two components, the familiar class of Being (the Forms) and the new entity space (which is referred to as being at 52c4 and indirectly, by analogy, in the gold analogy), then what Plato is saying is that these two different realities cannot exist in one another.

III. Plato's Ontology

In the section above I have given an account of the ontology presented in *Tim.* 48e-52d. In this section I shall characterize this ontology in such a way that certain implications of it should be apparent.

In general, it seems clear that Plato has an ontology in which there are two sorts of things which exist independently, namely the Forms and the Receptacle. In view of their independent status, I shall label these entities 'substances.' It should be noted that these substances play very different roles in the ontology. The Receptacle is a substance in that it is a substratum of change. Although I have noted that it would be incorrect to describe the Receptacle as if it were identical to Aristotelian matter, it does seem fair to say that both Aristotle's matter and Plato's Receptacle perform identical functions in the rival ontologies. Both, that is, underlie change.

The Forms are substance in a quite different sense. They are not the arena in which change occurs; rather, they are the entities from which changing phenomena derive their natures. They are (or, as Aristotle would put it, purport to be¹⁷) the essences of phenomena

17 Aristotle objects (*Metaph.* A. 9, 991b1-2) that the Forms could not possibly be the essences of things, since they were supposed to exist in separation from things. This is one of the many points on which the ontologies of Plato and Aristotle are in partial agreement (both agree that Form is essence) and partial disagreement.

rather than the substrata. As essences, they are abstract and non-spatial, intelligible rather than sensible, and eternally unchanging.

The Forms do not themselves enter into space. Rather, through a process Plato apparently finds quite mysterious (cf. 50c5-6, quoted above, p. 126), they serve as original patterns which the Demiurge copies, and these copies appear in space. These copies are phenomena, or at least the phenomenal portion of the world of change.¹⁸ Plato seems to regard them strictly as epiphenomena, as the causal products of the interaction of the Forms, the Demiurge, and space, without intrinsic (i.e. non-derived) causal properties of their own. These entities are dependent for their existence on the Receptacle in which they appear, and their appearance in the Receptacle does not modify or in any way affect the essential nature of the Receptacle. Cornford¹⁹ refers to them as 'qualities' of the Receptacle, and we may call them properties of the Receptacle if we remember that their modification of the Receptacle is merely apparent or at most accidental. At any rate, if anything in this ontology is analogous or identical to a property in the normal sense of that term, it is the phenomenal image of the Form that is reflected in the Receptacle. Not only are these images like properties of the Receptacle in that they depend on the Receptacle for their existence (as, in Aristotle, the other categories depend on substance); the linguistic distinction Plato draws between the Receptacle, which he calls 'this,' and the phenomena that appear in it, which he calls 'the such,' parallels the Aristotelian distinctions between substance and quality and subject and predicate.²⁰

18 It is simply not clear whether we are to regard the phenomenal object as merely the image of the Form as reflected in the Receptacle, or as the image + the portion of the Receptacle in which it occurs. When Plato talks of Becoming in and of itself he tends to speak of the phenomenal images as objects, but when he speaks of the Receptacle he tends to include it as a component of some sort in the makeup of phenomenal reality (cf. 51b, quoted above, p. 133). Although it is difficult to determine whether the various portions of the Receptacle are to be included as parts of individual phenomenal objects, it is hard to doubt that the Receptacle as a whole is taken to be part of the phenomenal cosmos.

19 Cornford, 181

20 When Aristotle gives his own resolution of the Third Man Argument (*De*

Phenomena are, according to this scheme, necessarily spatial. They have always been for Plato necessarily sensible and opinible rather than intelligible, and in constant flux. In all these respects they contrast strongly with the Forms. It is this contrast between the two sorts of entity (a contrast which the introduction of the Receptacle clarifies) that makes the Third Man idle.

IV. The Third Man Argument

As I have characterized it in the previous section, the ontology of the Receptacle contains two sorts of substance and one sort of attribute or property. The Receptacle is a substance in that it is the spatial underpinning, the substratum, of the phenomenal world. The Forms are substance in that they are the non-spatial essences of the phenomena that appear in the Receptacle. Phenomena are (or at least are similar to) properties, in that they exist in a substratum and require that substratum in order to exist at all. It remains to show how this ontology is unsusceptible to the Third Man Argument.

Sophisticis Elenchis, 178b36-39) he relies on a distinction only verbally distinct from Plato's between 'this' (*tode ti*) and 'such' (*toionde ti*), a distinction of fundamental importance for Aristotle's own ontology and one which is elaborated elsewhere (e.g. at *Metaph. Z*, 8, esp. 1033b19-1034a8).

It is essential to recognize, however, that the similarities in language and thought between Aristotle's explicit solution to the Third Man and the solution I find implicit in Plato are accompanied by equally important differences. Plato uses the this/such distinction to divide all phenomena from their spatial underpinning, whereas Aristotle uses it to distinguish concrete individuals, which he regards as substances, from their attributes. Given Plato's views about the instability of all phenomena, there could be for him no phenomenal substances; thus, he is forced to regard the individual substances of Aristotle's ontology as 'suches' rather than 'thisses,' and to treat them indifferently from their attributes. In addition, there is no place in Aristotle's ontology for the *separate* Forms that make up the third category in the ontology of the Receptacle passage. Although Aristotle does take seriously in *Metaphysics Z* the possibility that essence or Form might be primary substance, it is the enmattered form of the concrete individual that he considers, and not the abstract Platonic Form, which he treats as a universal.

The Third Man Argument has been so much discussed in the past quarter century that only the briefest summary of its nature should be required here. The argument occurs in two versions in the *Parmenides*. The second version (132c-133a) is directed against the view that the Forms are paradigms (the view maintained in the *Timaeus*); the first attacks the Theory of Forms in general. The versions are similar in form, and both depend on the same suppressed premisses: the self-predication and non-identity assumptions.²¹ No one I know of regards one version as a sound objection to the Theory of Forms and the other as unsound; we may thus treat the second version as a special case of the first.²²

As the argument can be given a valid formulation,²³ Plato can escape its conclusion and save the Theory of Forms only if he is not committed to one of the premisses of the argument. The premiss that most Plato scholars have found questionable is the self-predication assumption, which states that every Form is itself an instance of the property, kind, or relation of which it is the Form. The Form of *F* is *F*, in that it instantiates *F*-ness, is itself an *F* thing. The term '*F*,' that is, is applicable to the Form as a *predicate*.

Are the Forms self-predicative? Scholars have disagreed.²⁴ One of

21 Cf. Gregory Vlastos, 'The Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides*,' in R.E. Allen, ed., *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1965), 236-7, 242-3.

22 It is the view of G.E.L. Owen, whose argument I shall discuss in the next section, that only the interpretation of the Forms as paradigms is refuted by the *Parmenides*, and not the entire Theory of Forms (cf. 'The Place of the *Timaeus* in Plato's Dialogues,' in Allen, ed., 321-2, n. 3). If the second version of the argument is a sound objection to paradeigmatism, however, it would seem that the first version must be a sound objection to the theory as a whole. This fact makes Owen's view in all likelihood untenable.

23 Cf. e.g. Colin Strang, 'Plato and the Third Man,' in Vlastos, ed., 184-200.

24 Vlastos gave the self-predicational interpretation of '*F*-ness is *F*' in 'The Third Man Argument.' Alternative treatments of the statement-schema have been given by, e.g., R.E. Allen, 'Participation and Predication in Plato's Middle Dialogues,' in Allen, ed., 43-7; H.F. Cherniss, 'The Relation of the *Timaeus* to Plato's Later Dialogues,' in Allen, ed., 369-74; Vlastos himself, 'The Unity of the Virtues in the *Protagoras*,' in Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (Princeton:

the difficulties in answering the question with precision is that Plato does not seem to possess the semantic category of 'predicate.' It would be wrong to speak of Plato as if he had a fully developed semantic theory. To the extent that he does think of semantic issues, however, he seems to think of words as names and of meaning as reference. Even in places such as *Soph.* 261e-262a, where he distinguishes between 'nouns' (*onomata*) and 'verbs' (*rhēmata*), he makes both into referring expressions (nouns refer to agents, verbs to their actions). Thus, in terms of Plato's semantics, we should consider the question whether the Forms are self-predicative to be equivalent to the question whether the second occurrence of 'F' in statements of the form, 'The Form of F is F,' names (denotes, refers to) a property which is attributed to the object named by the subject term, 'the Form of F.'

Interestingly enough, there are no such explicit cases of self-predication (that is, no instances of statements of the sort, 'The Form of F is F') in the *Timaeus*, though they abound in other dialogues.²⁵ Owen seems to have thought that Plato is committed to self-predication by his claim that the Forms are paradigms; but this seems doubtful.²⁶ Nor is he committed to self-predication by virtue of his claim that Forms and phenomena resemble each other; for not every case of 'resemblance' in Plato involves the sharing of a property.²⁷

Princeton University Press 1973), 259-64; and Alexander Nehamas, 'Self-Predication and Plato's Theory of Forms,' *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (1979) 93-103.

25 For a list of such statements, cf. Anders Wedberg, 'The Theory of Ideas,' in Vlastos, ed., 41, n. 18.

26 The Greek term *'paradeigma'* may be translated 'exemplar' or 'pattern' depending on context. It is the former translation (suggested perhaps by the English expression, 'paradigm case') that leads to the assumption of self-predication and the resulting absurdities that, e.g., the Form of Large is a large thing, and the Form of Living Being a living being (cf. Vlastos, 'The Unity of the Virtues,' 261-2). Yet there is no passage in Plato which concerns the Forms in which the troublesome translation is required; furthermore, in light of the generality Plato attributes to his Forms on many occasions, it seems preferable to treat his 'paradigm' Forms as patterns rather than as exemplars.

27 Plato uses the language of resemblance most frequently not to describe what

Plato does, as we have seen, commit himself in the *Timaeus* to the view that the Forms and their phenomenal participants are homonymous, that they have the same name (52a5); but this would commit him to self-predication only if that name were in the case of the Form the name of a property. Thus, the question of self-predication boils down to this: does Plato's use of the general term 'F' in connection with the Form of F commit him to the claim that the Form itself has the property of being F? The Receptacle passage proves, I think, just the opposite: for the class of phenomenal properties, at least, the attribution of the phenomenal property to the Form of that property is not only not mandatory, it is a metaphysical impossibility.

Each of the three entities in the ontology of the *Timaeus* can be referred to. The Receptacle is referred to as 'this,' as 'space,' and of course as 'the Receptacle.' Both the Form of Fire and phenomenal fire can be referred to as 'fire': that is, 'Fire' is the name of both sorts of thing. Only in the case of phenomenal fire, however, is it plausible to construe the term 'fire' as a predicate. Phenomenal fire exists in a substratum, namely the Receptacle, and is a 'such' rather than a 'this.' I have likened phenomenal fire to a property of the Receptacle: thus, it seems reasonable to take 'This is fire,' asserted of a portion of the Receptacle, as a genuine case of predication. When we use such an expression of some phenomenal occurrence in the Receptacle, we mean to assert, as Plato tells us (52b), that some portion of the Receptacle is

we should call paradigm cases of resemblance, such as the relation between identical twins or two sets of equal objects, but to describe the relation that holds between a man and his portrait or between the Form of Equality and a set of equal objects. Rather than assuming that resemblance essentially involves the sharing of a property, as Parmenides insists in the second version of the Third Man Argument, Plato insists that when two objects resemble each other in the manner that images resemble originals, the images lack the properties of their originals (*Cratylus* 432d). Plato knows that the portrait of a man does not resemble its original by being a man; he also knows that the Form of Equality does not resemble its participants by being a pair of equal objects. For a good example of Plato's use of the language of resemblance in a context where the sharing of a property is ruled out, cf. *Tim.* 37c-38c, where the cosmos is said to resemble its archetype in that the archetype is atemporal and motionless, whereas the cosmos exists forever in time and is in constant motion.

inflamed or moistened, or whatever; that is, that a part of the substratum has (or at least appears to have) some characteristic. Only when we have a characteristic attributed to a substance do we have the ontological basis for the predication of a general term of a subject. Thus, although Plato does not make any claims about the semantic aspects of such a situation, he does provide us, in the case of the appearance of a phenomenon in the Receptacle, with an ontological situation like that which grounds predication.

In the case of the application of the term, 'fire,' to the Form of Fire, however, we do not have a case of predication. As in the case of phenomenal fire, the term functions as a name, but this time it functions as the name of a substance, the essence of fire, rather than as the name of a property that is asserted of a substance. Not only are we not required to interpret the application of the term 'fire' to the Form as a predicate; it seems impossible to do so, on the basis of the ontology of the Receptacle passage. Plato, in distinguishing the Receptacle, phenomena, and the Forms from one another, has given only the Receptacle the role of a substratum, a substance which can be the recipient of properties. Thus, we are told how to make attributions to the Receptacle, but not how to attribute properties to the Forms. Further, the only entities in this ontology which function as properties are the phenomenal images of Forms which appear in the Receptacle. If we were to understand the application of 'fire' to the Form of Fire as a case of predication, we should have to interpret it as the predication of a phenomenal property of an intelligible Form. Yet if there is one thing on which Plato repeatedly insists in his dialogues, it is that the intelligible and phenomenal worlds are separate (cf. e.g. *Phdo.* 65e-67a, *Rep.* VI-VII, 507a-521b, and *Tim.* 27d-28a). To attribute phenomenal properties to the Forms would violate the categorial distinction between Being and Becoming, and it would fly in the face of the claim that Plato has emphasized in the *Timaeus* (52b-d) that the Forms are not in space, since no object that is not in the phenomenal world could have phenomenal characteristics.²⁸

28 The fact that the Forms are not in space means that they cannot be the causes of things by virtue of being *in* them. This point is raised by Aristotle as an objection to the Theory of Forms (*Metaph.* A. 9, 991b1ff; cf. 992a24ff.); yet imma-

The ontology of the Receptacle is limited; the only sort of property it deals with is the phenomenal property. It is precisely this sort of property, however, that gives force to the Third Man. It is the attribution of the spatial property of being large to the Form of Largeness that makes the Theory of Forms seem absurd (cf. *Parm.* 132a-b); no similar absurdity results from the attribution of properties that do not have spatial or phenomenal connotations to the Forms. The Form of Beauty may safely said to be beautiful, the Form of Unity single, and the Form of Being real; indeed, these self-predicational statements are mandatory in Plato's theory.²⁹ The *Timaeus* rules out the possibility of attributing phenomenal properties to the Forms by making all of them

ment causation seems to be a feature of the Theory of Forms in the early *Euthyphro* (5d1-5), and it is at least arguable that Plato depicts the Forms themselves and not just their corresponding immanent characters as 'in' things in *Phaedo* 100cff., where he outlines what might be called the 'official' position of the middle dialogues on the causal role of the Forms (for contrasting views on the ontology of the *Phaedo* passage, cf. Vlastos, 'Reasons and Causes,' 139-43, and David Gallop, *Plato Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975), 195-6; as noted above (n. 13), I side with Gallop on this point).

Thus, the doctrine of the *Timaeus* on the causal role of the Forms appears to be different from that of the *Phaedo*. This change may be the result of Plato's reflection on the arguments against the Forms in the *Parmenides*; whether or not he accepted the arguments against immanence given at *Parm.* 130e-131e or the 'Two-Worlds Argument' of *Parm.* 133a-134e at face value, he seems to have realized that he could not insist both on the transcendence of the Forms and on their immanence. His solution to this problem, at least as far as the *Timaeus* is concerned, is to adhere to the view that the Forms are transcendent, and to relegate their causal role to that of *paradeigmata*, patterns. The causal function performed by the Forms in the *Phaedo* is taken over by the immanent characters that correspond to them and, more importantly, by the Demiurge. It is surely significant that, whereas the investigation of causation in the *Phaedo* led Socrates to posit the Forms, the search for a cause of Becoming in the *Timaeus* (and, incidentally, in the *Philebus*, 26e-30e) leads Timaeus to introduce the Demiurge (28c-29a). Thus, though the Forms continue to play a crucial role in the cosmological scheme of the *Timaeus*, it is the role of patterns or models from which the creator shapes the cosmos, and not that of immanent causes.

²⁹ Vlastos, 'The Unity of the Virtues,' 259. Presumably, these self-predicational statements are legitimized by the denial of the other crucial assumption of the Third Man: the non-identity assumption.

properties only of the Receptacle, but it says nothing about these other properties. In the *Sophist*, Plato gives the outline of an account of the way in which these non-phenomenal properties may be attributed to Forms; in so doing it goes beyond anything in the *Timaeus*.³⁰ In order to derive a complete picture of the properties which may be attributed to the Forms, one would have to combine the account of the *Timaeus* with that of the *Sophist*.

I have argued that the Receptacle passage shows that Plato is not, and cannot be, committed to self-predication in the case of Forms of phenomenal properties. For such Forms to be self-predicative, Plato would have to transgress the doctrine of the separation of Being and Becoming, on which he has long insisted, and the view expressed in this passage that the Forms are non-spatial. Further, given the fact that the Forms are treated in this passage as the essences of things, it is more plausible to interpret the application of the term, 'F,' to the Form of F as a case of self-reference than as a case of self-predication. To say, 'The Form of F is F,' on this interpretation, is to name the Form rather than to attribute a characteristic to it.

Still, it may be objected, when we refer to the Form of Fire as 'Fire,' or the Form of Man as 'Man,' we must characterize the Form in some way, at least implicitly. In order for us to be able to pick out the Form of Fire at all, that Form must have some attributes that distinguish it from the other Forms. This point is well taken, and Platonic dialectic is indeed committed to the claim that the Forms are distinguishable from each other. Though admission of this point involves us in the attribution of properties to Forms, however, it does not commit us to self-predication.

To see why this is so, let us distinguish three sorts of reference. The first I shall call 'pure' reference. In pure reference, we in no way describe the object referred to; we simply refer to it. 'This' is a term of pure reference, and in Plato's ontology all genuine reference in the

30 This is not to say that the *Sophist* is later than the *Timaeus*, though I suspect that it is. The theory of the *Sophist* does not appear in the *Timaeus* (except for a brief allusion at 35a) because the cosmological project of the *Timaeus* essentially involves relations between Forms and phenomena, as the *Sophist* does not, but does not involve relations of predication among Forms, as the project of the *Sophist* does.

phenomenal world is assimilated to this kind of reference, and the Receptacle is regarded as the ultimate referent of all statements about entities in that world.

The second sort of reference I shall call 'ordinary descriptive' reference. This sort of reference is involved when I say of Socrates, 'This man is wise.' 'Man' is used referentially here; it is part of the subject phrase and it serves to denote Socrates. In using the term 'man,' though, I do not merely denote Socrates; I attribute to him the properties that characterize essentially a human being. There is thus a predicative component in reference of this sort, which Plato seems to have recognized in his account in the *Timaeus* by assimilating ostensible cases of reference in the phenomenal world to cases of predication. According to the passage we have discussed, apparent substance terms such as 'earth' and 'fire' turn out on analysis to be the names of immanent characteristics which are attributed to the Receptacle. Thus 'earth,' no less than 'wise' or 'white,' is treated as a predicative term.

There is, however, another sort of reference that contrasts with both of the above. I shall call it 'descriptive reference to kinds.' I can use the term 'fire' or the term 'man' not to refer to instances of the kind fire or the kind man but to the kinds themselves. When I ask 'What is fire?' for instance, I am asking a question about a sort of thing rather than about specific examples of that sort. In defining the sort of thing fire is, I try to attribute characteristics to the sort which will serve to distinguish it from other sorts, and which will enable me to classify all the instances of that sort as in fact instance of *it* rather than of something else. Thus, when I use a natural kind term to refer to the kind, I assert or imply that there is a set of characteristics possessed by that kind that sets it off from every other kind. I may not know what these characteristics are; it is the task of Platonic dialectic to discover them. It is certainly not a presupposition of my reference to the kind as 'fire' that it possess the characteristics that the *instances* of the kind possess. To argue that Plato must have presupposed this, that he must have been committed to self-predication, is to argue that he could not have distinguished between the two sorts of descriptive reference I have discussed.³¹ Yet the Receptacle passage, I have argued, indicates

31 W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, v. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge

clearly that Plato did distinguish between Forms and phenomena, or between sorts of things and instances of those sorts; and it seems unfair, in light of that distinction, to deny him at least an implicit distinction between the use of the term 'F' to refer to the Form of F and its use to refer to any phenomenal instance of F.

In short, to use a general term, 'F,' to refer to the Form of F is to make a descriptive reference to the kind, F-ness. The difference between doing this and making a descriptive reference of the ordinary kind is assimilated by Plato in this passage to the difference between referring to a Form and attributing a property to the Receptacle. Though Plato describes the difference differently from the way we might, he acknowledges it; and this acknowledgement should free him from the burden of self-predication.

V. The Chronological Question

I have argued that the Receptacle passage of the *Timaeus* shows that Plato is not committed to self-predication in the case of Forms of phenomenal properties. Thus, he is not committed to an assumption necessary to make the Third Man Argument a sound objection to the Theory of Forms, despite the fact that he is committed to views which some have thought implied self-predication: the views that Forms and phenomena are homonymous, that they resemble each other, and that Forms are *paradeigmata* of which phenomena are images. If the Receptacle passage shows that the Forms are not in general self-predicative, then we must search for interpretations of these claims that do not in fact imply self-predication; I have briefly suggested some alternatives (cf. nn. 25 and 26 above).

If the Theory of Forms as presented in the *Timaeus* is not in fact

University Press 1978), 43-4 has argued that what is predicated of the Form is not the phenomenal property which its participants derive from the Form, but a corresponding intelligible property. I am not sure what Guthrie means by this, but perhaps his point is the same as mine. In either case, it should be noted, the regress of the Third Man does not arise.

committed to self-predication, and is thus insusceptible to the Third Man Argument, it is impossible to argue, as G.E.L. Owen has done in an influential paper, that the *Timaeus* must be earlier than the *Parmenides* since it contains a version of the Theory of Forms refuted in that dialogue.³² This does not in itself prove that the *Timaeus* is one of the latest dialogues Plato wrote; we can also find evidence in dialogues generally thought to be earlier than the *Parmenides* that Plato was not committed to self-predication as a general principle (to cite but one passage, Plato distinguishes in *Rep.* X, 597a between the essence of a bed and some particular instance of that essence). In view of such passages, it seems unlikely that Plato was ever committed to self-predication; in which case the introduction of the Receptacle in the *Timaeus* serves merely to clarify, and not to modify, Plato's views on this matter.

There are strong independent reasons for regarding the *Timaeus* as a late dialogue, however. Chief among them are the facts that the ancient interpretive tradition, from Aristotle on, regarded the *Timaeus* as a source of Plato's mature views, rather than as a representation of a stage of thought Plato later rejected; and that every study of chronology based on style has supported the conclusion that the *Timaeus* was written after the *Parmenides*.³³ Owen's radical proposal to remove the *Timaeus* from the late to the middle dialogues has been influential in large part because of his argument based on the Third Man; in attempting to show that the Third Man is not a sound objection to the Theory of Forms of the *Timaeus*, I have tried not to prove that the dialogue is late, but merely to remove one powerful argument against so regarding it.

32 'The Place of the *Timaeus*,' 318-22

33 The results of earlier stylistic studies are summarized in W.D. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1951), 2-10; for a more recent study with the same results, cf. L. Brandwood, *A Word Index to Plato* (Leeds: W.S. Maney & Son 1976), xvi-xviii.