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3-2013

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We Should Always Call the Receptacle the Same Thing:

***Timaeus* 50b6-51b6**

Christopher Buckels

Plato's *Timaeus* is a challenge to understand and to interpret, but its central ontological innovation, a third kind in addition to the standard Platonic categories of Being and Becoming, is, even according to Timaeus himself, a murky and difficult topic. I endeavor to shed a meager light on this shadowy entity, the Receptacle of all Becoming, by examining an argument Timaeus gives for the claim that "we should always call it the same thing" (50b6-7).¹ This claim comes immediately after the famous gold analogy, about which I will say only a few words, and so it also closely follows the "much misread" passage of 49c7-50b5, about which I will say even less.² At the other end of the argument (51b6-e6), Timaeus takes up the question of the existence of Forms; this is another topic I will leave aside. What I will do is to focus on the argument that is given in the nine lines from 50b6-c6 and explained in the following page (50c7-51b6), employing what is perhaps "bastard reasoning" to extract from this passage some clear *dogmata* about this unclear kind.³

I. The Main Argument

Timaeus introduces the Receptacle in his 'second beginning' (48e2ff), apparently adding it as a third kind to the other two kinds he has discussed, Being and Becoming (Forms and copies of Forms).⁴ Up to this point, he tells us, two kinds sufficed, "but now the argument compels me to make clear in words a difficult and unclear kind" (49a3-4). Timaeus then asks what nature (*φύσις*) and capacity (*δύναμις*) we should assign to it (49a4-5). We should recognize here a case of hendiadys and might, thus, rephrase the question a bit, asking what 'natural capacity' is possessed by this third kind, for these two

¹ All references are to Burnet's edition of the *Timaeus*, unless otherwise noted. Translations are my own.

² Interpretations of this passage include Cherniss 1954, Cornford 1937, pp. 178-81, Gulley 1960, Lee 1967, McCabe 1994, pp. 179-84, Miller 2003, Mohr 1980, pp. 138-44, reprinted in Mohr 1985, pp. 85-91, and Mohr 2005, pp. 83-90, Prior 1985, pp. 109-10, Silverman 1992, Silverman 2002, pp. 257-65, Taylor 1928, White 1981, pp. 307-19, Zeyl 1975, and Zeyl 2000, pp. lvi-lxiv.

³ In this paper I will not claim that Plato believes there is a Receptacle with such a nature as is laid out in the *Timaeus*, although I think this is likely. Instead, I'll discuss what Timaeus, the character in the dialogue, tells us about the Receptacle.

⁴ I take it that the Receptacle is the only member of the third kind; Miller 2003 argues that there is another member, space.

concepts—nature and capacity—are closely connected.⁵ In the subsequent discussion, φύσις and δύναμις will often be used of the third kind interchangeably; in each case, we are seeking what characterizes it as some determinate kind of thing, in contradistinction to the first two kinds.

The natural capacity of the third kind, Timaeus reveals, is a capacity to receive all coming to be; it is the Receptacle of all Becoming. Before we can understand this enigmatic utterance further, however, Timaeus says that we must detour through a puzzle about fire and the other so-called elements. This puzzle is the motivation for positing the Receptacle; it will motivate our theoretical posit of a Receptacle that receives all genesis. The problem, in brief, is how to identify the elements, since they seem to change into one another. The Receptacle provides the necessary ground for individualization and (possibly) identity over time: only the Receptacle, we will see, is constant, while the things that come to be in it are ephemeral, continually coming to be and perishing and never providing a stable referent for language.

After a harshly contested argument in which Timaeus instructs us either to call fire (and each visible thing) τὸ τοιοῦτον (“this-such”) or, according to the other side of this bitter dispute, tells us to call τὸ τοιοῦτον fire, he gives us an analogy: the Receptacle is analogous to some gold in which a sculptor is continually molding different shapes (50a5-b6). If someone asks us, pointing to one of the figures, “what is that?” Timaeus says it would be safest just to reply, “gold.” The idea is that the figures are being changed so rapidly that it would be incorrect to say “triangle,” since the sculptor is flattening out the tips of the triangle, busily forming a square, even as one gives the answer. So it is safest to say, “it is gold.” With regard to the triangles and other shapes appearing in the gold, we can never say that these transitory figures are real—e.g., “that really is a triangle”—but we can say that ‘what is such’ is real, whenever it is put into the gold—e.g., “such a figure really is a triangle.”⁶

The same account goes for the nature that accepts all bodies, Timaeus tells us, i.e.,

⁵ In the *Sophist* (247e3-4), for example, it is stated that the mark of a being, i.e., something that exists, and, thus, something that has a nature, is having a capacity.

⁶ Zeyl 1975, p. 143, seems to believe that this passage tells us that it is both true and false to say “triangle” in response to the question, “what is it?” If we mean by “triangle” a τοῦτο, then we have spoken falsely. If we mean by “triangle” a τοιοῦτον, we have spoken truly. Since Zeyl gives no criticism of Cherniss 1954, pp. 125-8, which offers a more intuitive explanation of the passage, I follow Cherniss’ interpretation. Cf. Mohr 2005, pp. 101-10.

for the Receptacle. We can see where he is going with this line of thought, because we've just been told (49e7-50a4) that fire is not a *this*, something to which we can point, but a *this-such*. The fiery stuff is only temporarily fiery, so it is not fire. Likewise, "that is a triangle" is false when one points to a triangular piece of gold, because the gold can be molded into many other shapes; but "that is gold" is true, since it will still be gold, however one molds it. And so, taking the analogy for what it is worth, it seems the only true deictic statement we can make is, "that is the Receptacle," for the Receptacle is the only 'thing' that is always the same, however it appears.⁷

When he first introduced the third kind, Timaeus told us that its natural capacity is to receive all coming to be (49a4-6). But he put off any more detail until after the puzzle with the elements. In fact, he frequently puts off detail about the Receptacle. Twice he says he must "speak more clearly about it" (49a6-b2, 50a4-5), and several other times he gestures to the difficulty and uncertainty of the subject (49a3-4, 50c6, 51a7-b2, 51b2-4, 52b2). But at 50b6-c6, Timaeus finally tells us how to address the Receptacle, and he gives us an argument for the claim that there is one stable nature answering to its name (in a way that there is not a 'thing' or a 'this' answering to the name 'fire,' for example).

We should always call it [the nature that accepts all bodies] by the same term: for (1) it does not in any way stand aside from its own capacity—for (2) it always receives everything, and it never takes on even one character (μορφή) that resembles any of the things coming into it, in any way whatsoever; for (3) it lies by nature as a wax block for all, being moved and reconfigured by the things coming into it, and because of them it appears different at different times—and the things coming into it and going out of it are always copies of the things that are, and they are stamped from them in a manner that is hard to explain and fantastic (50b6-c6)

The argument comes in three steps. First, the nature that accepts all bodies should be designated by one term because it has one stable nature. Second, it has one stable nature because it receives everything that comes to be without taking on the character of anything it receives. Third, it receives those things without taking on their characters

⁷ As I point out below, we have to be careful to avoid being misled by the analogy and thinking that the Receptacle is too much like gold. Cf. Prior 1985, p. 112, and Johansen 2004, p. 122, n. 8.

because they cause it to *appear* different rather than to *be* different. Thus this nature is consistent and always the same, and so it deserves a name that is consistent and always the same: the Receptacle of all Becoming. Plato is, of course, dealing with real names and real definitions: any normative claim about the proper name for a thing reflects its nature. We should call something by one and the same name because it has one unified nature. For example, Timaeus told us that we should not call a body “fire,” since it does not, itself, have the nature of fire. Its nature is different from fire’s nature, since it can also take on the character, e.g., of water. The Receptacle, however, does have a stable nature; we can confidently call it that which receives images of Forms.

Each premise in the argument is carefully explained afterwards, as is the conclusion. But before we get to the explanations, Timaeus gives us a further conclusion based on this argument: since there is one thing, always the same, that we should rightly (and always) call the Receptacle, it follows that we should think there are three kinds of thing: that which comes to be, that in which it comes to be, and that from which what comes to be is produced as a copy (50c7-d2). Our tripartite ontology, first given at 48e2-49a6, is reaffirmed. The Receptacle is distinct from Forms and from sensibles; in fact, it provides a place for sensibles, which are images (copies) of Forms in the Receptacle.

II. Step Three

We can approach the argument in three steps, each a *modus ponens* with an implicit conditional premise. Working backwards, we can see that each step has as its conclusion the key premise of the preceding step, until we conclude that the Receptacle should be called one thing. Hence Timaeus begins his explanation with the third and final step, which is the most complex:

The Receptacle lies by nature as a wax block for all, being moved and reconfigured by the things coming into it, and because of them it appears different at different times—and the things coming into it and going out of it are always copies of the things that are, and they are stamped from them in a manner that is hard to explain and fantastic (50c2-6).

This third premise boils down to an assertion about the Receptacle: the things coming into it make it appear different at different times. At first blush, we might think that this

claim permits the Receptacle to change, but we should keep firmly in mind that this is a premise for the conclusion that the Receptacle should always be called by one and the same name, i.e., that it has a consistent, unchanging nature.⁸ In fact, just because something *appears* different need not mean that it *is* different. Timaeus explains that the Receptacle must be completely uncharacterized by the things that appear in it; there are impressions in it, he says, that will be ‘stamped’ from the Forms for “the seeing of variegated things in varied ways.” In other words, stamps, or copies, of Forms in the Receptacle will provide the basis for the appearances of all sensible objects, and thus the Receptacle will only be well prepared to receive those stamps if it is uncharacterized (ἄμορφος) by any of those characters (ιδέα) it is going to receive (50d4-e1). For example, if the Receptacle is going to appear to be colored in all sorts of color, then it must not itself have a color; if it were white, red would appear pink in it, and so on. While appearing different, then, the Receptacle remains the same, uncharacterized by the things coming to be in it.

If we join our third premise with a conditional statement to the effect that what appears in something need not affect that thing, we get an argument such as this:

P1) If a receiver only *appears* different (and is not really different), then it is not affected (in itself) by what it receives.

P2) The things coming into the Receptacle only make it *appear* different.

C) The Receptacle is not affected by what it receives.

P2 is, of course, the third premise of our main argument, and C, we will see, is the second premise of the main argument.

III. Step Two

Let’s turn, then, to examine the second premise:

The Receptacle always receives everything, and it never takes on even one character (μορφή) that resembles any of the things coming into it, in any way whatsoever (50b8-c2).

The essential point of the second premise is that the Receptacle is not affected by what it receives. For, as Timaeus goes on to say in his explanation, if it resembled any of the

⁸ Cf. Mohr 2005, p. 89, n. 15.

things it is going to receive, it would reflect poorly whatever has an opposite or completely different nature from the characters it resembled, since it would impose its own aspect upon those appearances it is supposed to reflect (50e1-4). In other words, the Receptacle must be, like a good wax tablet, completely unmarked by the kinds of marks it is going to receive. The good wax tablet can't already have impressions in it, because those marks would obscure whatever one is going to press into it. Gold, to be an appropriate medium for shaping various shapes, must not naturally 'prefer' one shape, i.e., it must not permit squares to appear in itself better than triangles appear in itself. Likewise, the Receptacle, though it is reconfigured by the appearances that are 'pressed into' it, cannot already have impressions in it. Its nature is to receive those appearances well, and to do that it must not have any appearance of its own.⁹

If we apply these considerations to the Form images that come to be in it, we see that the Receptacle must not be an image of any of the Forms, since it is supposed to receive all Form images. If the Receptacle were, in itself, hot, since it itself was an image of Fire, it would receive shares of Water or shares of Cold very poorly. So its nature is to be completely ἀμορφος, uncharacterized by any Form whatsoever, since its nature is to receive into itself, and so present for sensation, images of all Forms whatsoever.

Timaeus gives us two images to help us understand this second premise, though the images may actually deceive us if we do not keep firmly in mind that they are images and, thus, in a way, deceptive.¹⁰ Because of everything we've just discussed, the

⁹ Cf. Prior 1985, p. 112-3.

¹⁰ The wax block imagery, which we've just looked at, can itself be deceptive, and taking it too literally leads to a problem. The difficulty is as follows: there are three kinds of thing: Forms, the Receptacle, here imagined as a wax block, and that which comes to be, here imagined as impressions in the block of wax. The Forms, presumably, would be stamps, the ideal models that cause the impressions. But this role seems closed to them, since a Form does not "itself come into another thing anywhere" (52a3). How would the Forms stamp impressions into the Receptacle without coming into it, for at least a moment, in order to press into the wax and form an impression? One would have to hold that the Forms are ideal stamps, and that there are intermediaries that are actual stamps, and these intermediaries, in turn, form impressions, i.e., the things that come to be. But this interpretation would introduce a fourth ontological category into the *Timaeus*, which should be avoided, since Timaeus explicitly lists three kinds.

Though the wax block image should not be taken too literally, it is still a valuable image for how Form images come to be in the Receptacle. Like stamps impressed into wax, Forms give their character to the Receptacle, shaping it in a certain way. The character of the Form that comes to be in the Receptacle is a image of that Form. Where we must modify the wax imagery, though, is where it leads us to believe that the Receptacle is some material, like a hunk of gold that is constantly reshaped. These—wax and gold—are merely images for a thing which is difficult to imagine, something that must be grasped by "bastard reasoning." In fact, Plato does not mention the Receptacle at all in his treatment of sensibles in the *Timaeus* before the second beginning (48e2), just as he doesn't mention it in any other dialogue. Of course, it seems

Receptacle, which is to receive all forms (γέννη) in itself, must be without any of the forms (εἶδη), just as the base of a perfume must be made completely scentless, so that one can impose any scent upon it one wishes; similarly, any soft substance—let’s take molding clay—must be completely without shape, so that one can impose any shape upon it (50e4-51a1). This last image reminds us of the gold image, with which Timaeus prefaced the entire argument. Let’s examine these images. The base of the perfume is designated by the same terms as the Receptacle, “this very thing” (τοῦτο αὐτό), and it is said to be the base (ὑπάρχον) that will receive scents. This base must underlie the scents without imposing any scent of its own. Likewise, it is said that the craftsmen who mold the clay do not permit any shape at all to stand out in the clay, i.e., to underlie the shapes that they try to mold into it.

Now these images may delude the reader into thinking that the Receptacle is some material substrate for objects, but this would be to be deceived by the images. The clay cannot have any particular shape essentially, since it is supposed to receive all shapes, and the perfume base cannot have any scent, since it is supposed to receive any scent. Both may, of course, have lots of other properties. In fact, they must have lots of other properties; the perfume base must be liquid, the clay must be solid. The Receptacle, however, is to receive *all* things into itself. It can not be like any of those things it receives. Its nature is, in fact, to be like none of them, but to receive all.¹¹ So if it is to receive material things, it cannot be material. It must underlie all things without imposing anything upon them or contributing anything to them; the only characters those things have are provided by Forms, since they are merely images of Forms. What the Receptacle provides is not a character but rather a place or space for these characters. It is that ‘in

that the Receptacle would have been an unnecessary complication in those previous accounts, but now he brings up the question: if sensibles are images of Forms, what are Form images *in*? Mustn’t they be somewhere or in something? This is “bastard reasoning” because we do not reason about the Receptacle directly, but, instead, we see a need for it in reasoning about other things. We see it as a necessary posit, analogous to Newton’s ether, a medium that explained causation at a distance, something for which we have no direct evidence but which must exist to explain the phenomena.

¹¹ The Receptacle can share in no Forms, but it seems that it does have properties, contra White 1981, pp. 327 & 339, n. 9, since it has a nature; cf. Miller 2003, p. 90. It should, at least, have the property of being able to receive Form images.

White 1981, p. 319, seems to hold that the Receptacle is given properties later in the dialogue, though it is initially described as having none. It has properties, White explains, in order to account for Form images coming to be in a certain place at a certain time. But the Receptacle need not, in fact, have properties for this reason; Timaeus has already brought in the demiurge to explain how Form images come to be at a certain time in a certain place.

which' Form images come to be.

If we join our second premise with a conditional statement to the effect that what isn't affected by what it receives doesn't alter its nature, we get an argument such as this:

P1) If a receiver is not affected (in itself) by what it receives, then it does not alter its nature.

P2) The Receptacle is not affected by what it receives.

C) The Receptacle does not alter its nature.

As we can see, P2 is the second premise of our main argument, and C is the first premise of the main argument.

IV. Step One

Let's turn, finally, to the first premise of our main argument:

The nature that accepts all bodies (i.e., the Receptacle) does not in any way stand aside from its own capacity (50b7-8).

Since the Receptacle will duly receive copies of all the things that always exist continuously along the entirety of itself, Timaeus tells us, it is fitting for it to be naturally without any of the forms (51a1-3). Its nature is to be without characteristic; it cannot accept any other nature than its own as a characteristic of itself. And so its nature is to be receptive of all things that come to be, and it never alters from that receptive nature. The fact that it can receive Form images throughout its entirety is important: it cannot be the case that part of the Receptacle is naturally suited for fire or part naturally suited for water, since it can accept any Form image in any part of itself.

We should go back to one thing said earlier in the original argument: the Receptacle is moved by the things entering into it (50c2-3). Now that we've seen that the Receptacle must be completely uncharacterized by any of the characteristics of what comes into it, we can interpret this claim more perspicuously. Since it receives things apparently in motion, the Receptacle cannot be in motion itself, since then it would reflect opposite motions badly.¹² It cannot reflect leftward motion adequately if it is, in

¹² As Miller 2003, p. 155, points out, the shaking of the Receptacle is "strong evidence against" interpreting the Receptacle to be space. But this is only the case if the Receptacle, in itself, shakes. The shaking is metaphorical (see next note), but it is not 'purely mythical.' The appearance of shaking serves a purpose, namely to explain the separation of like and unlike. Furthermore, I do not see how the shaking of

itself, moving rightward. Any description of the Receptacle as moving must, then, be metaphorical.¹³ Since we only experience the Receptacle through experiencing the things that appear in it, we may *say* that it moves since we experience those things moving. It might even *seem* that space moves, since things ‘in’ space move. But this would be to impart the characteristics of things in space to space itself, and Timaeus warns us not to do this. It may be that we *must* speak metaphorically, at times, in describing the Receptacle and its contents—employing bastard metaphors, as it were—since we cannot directly apprehend it either by sensation or intellection, but we should not thereby attribute to the Receptacle all the attributes of our metaphor.

So, if we join our first premise with a conditional statement to the effect that what doesn’t alter its nature should be called the same thing, we get an argument such as this:

P1) If something does not alter its nature (i.e., it has an unchanging nature), then it should be called the same thing.

P2) The Receptacle does not alter its nature.

C) The Receptacle should be called the same thing.

The first premise of our main argument is P2, and the conclusion of the main argument is C. We now have a three step argument leading to our main conclusion.

V. Conclusion

Timaeus returns to explain the conclusion of his argument, that we should always call the Receptacle one and the same thing. First we get the negative conclusion: because of everything we’ve discussed, the Receptacle is not earth, or air, or fire, or water; nor is it anything composed of these or out of which these were composed (51a4-6). We should

the Receptacle is any easier to explain on the hypothesis that the Receptacle is a substratum.

¹³ Looking forward to the “shaking” of the Receptacle (52e4-53a7), notice that movement is not really assigned to the Receptacle itself. The Receptacle does not start to move anything, but the imbalance in the Receptacle causes it to rock and sway. The Receptacle is simply being ‘changed and reconfigured’ by the things in it, as we saw above (50c2-3). Since the things coming into it move, the Receptacle cannot move. So the Receptacle is in *apparent* motion, not real motion. It must be, in itself, unmoved, but it must be able to appear to be in motion in all ways, just as it must be able to appear all ways in general. And this appearing is, of course, the appearing of the Form images *in* it, since it does not, strictly speaking, appear to us, but the things in it do appear to us. To think of this problem in a different way, it makes some sense to say that the Receptacle is in motion, since we only perceive the things in it, not it itself, and the things in it are in motion. So, for all we know from our senses, the Receptacle is in motion, too. This may even be why we need to grasp the Receptacle with the aid of “non-sensation,” since we would be deceived if we tried to use our senses to investigate it: it would appear to be in motion, and to be colored, burned, moistened, etc., while it is, in fact, none of those.

not call the Receptacle one (or all) of the elements, since these all have certain characters, and it must be, of course, without any character. Recalling the gold example that prefaced this argument, we cannot call the gold a triangle or a square or any other shape, since it is not *really* any of these, and it is not even temporarily any of these for any determinate length of time (since it is being constantly remolded). If we want to be safe, we should call it only “gold.” Since the Receptacle cannot have the character of any of the elements, we also cannot call it any of the things made of the elements, since anything made of the elements will have their characters. This means, of course, that we cannot call the Receptacle any bodily, sensible thing, since all bodily, sensible things are composed out of the elements (31b5-32b2). Finally, Timaeus tells us that we should not call the Receptacle anything out of which the elements are made (51a6), since those things, too, must have characters. This prohibition keeps us from calling the Receptacle constitutive matter, since matter would presumably be that of which the elements are made.¹⁴ Although Timaeus hasn’t pursued the project of naming the elements of the elements (cf. 48b5-d1, 53d6-7), we can definitively rule out naming the Receptacle as the ultimate material element or constituent of any material thing.

So what, then, can we call the Receptacle? “We will not err in saying that it is some invisible and amorphous form, all-receiving, which participates in the intelligible in some most puzzling and difficult to grasp manner” (51a7-b1). We can reliably and continuously call the Receptacle this kind of thing, the nature that, without being sensible itself, receives into itself all kinds of sensible characters for appearing. We can say of it, insofar as it is possible to reach its nature, that the part of it that is ignited appears each time as fire, the liquefied part appears each time as water, the compressed part of it appears each time as earth, and the rarefied part of it appears each time as air, and that these appearances occur whenever the Receptacle receives images of these (fire, water, earth, and air). This final remark should caution us not to think, again, that the Receptacle is actually ignited, so that it itself assumes the character of fire, changing and departing from its own nature. Instead, the Receptacle receives an image of Fire, and so that part of the Receptacle appears to be fiery.¹⁵

¹⁴ Where matter is stuff-like. “Matter” can mean many things, so it may be that on some conceptions of matter, the Receptacle is matter. Cf. Mueller 2010.

¹⁵ Accordingly, this passage, which Zeyl 1975, p. 135, (in arguing against Cherniss) thinks ‘refutes’ the

Let's return to our original argument. It is evident now that each premise builds upon and explains the last. First we are told that the natural capacity that receives all bodies is unchanging. The second premise clarifies this: though it receives many characters, it is not itself characterized by these characters. Just because it receives heat doesn't mean that it is hot. How, we may ask, can it receive characters and not be characterized? The third premise explains: the Receptacle *appears* different at different times because of those characters that come into it and go out of it. So it is apparently, but not really, characterized by the things it receives. Thus, despite appearing completely different from one moment to the next and despite receiving all kinds of characters, the Receptacle is, in itself, unchanged. It is the natural capacity to receive all sensible, bodily characters, and it does this well, by not imposing any aspect of itself upon the appearances that come to be in it. And since it has such a stable, unified nature, we can refer to it as one entity: the Receptacle.

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notion that, strictly speaking, "fire" indicates the character (i.e., the Form image) rather than a sensible particular, is not difficult to interpret. Part of the Receptacle *appears* as fire—obviously we have a loose reference to visible fire here, as the φαίνεσθαι indicates—when the Receptacle receives the copy (μιμήμα) of Fire.

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