The aim of this paper is to provide a new reading of Plato’s precosmos (Ti. 52d2-53c3) which accounts for why the Receptacle in itself is absolutely amorphon, and for Timaeus’ notion of generation: it detects an effective philosophical pay-off in Plato’s reference to this puzzling dimension. More specifically, I shall argue that the precosmos is populated by sensible particular bodies consisting of redundant complexes of properties, and that this is the effect of the Receptacle’s full precosmic participation in the Paradigm. This will turn out to be consistent with a robust notion of ‘precosmic generation’ and will reveal why Plato may have sought to refer to this otherwise puzzling scenario: representing the precosmos in this way allows Plato to effectively justify why the Demiurge is responsible only for the goodness and perfection of the universe, and why it is properly the best possible cause.

T1. Timaeus 52d2-53c3 (Transl. Cornford 1937; modifications highlighted with asterisks)

Let this, then, be given as the tale summed according to my judgment: that there are Being, Space, *Generation* – three distinct things, even before the Heaven *had generation*. Now the nurse of *Generation*, being made watery and fiery and receiving the *shapes* of earth and air, and qualified by all the other affections that go with these, had every sort of diverse appearance to the sight; but because it was filled with powers that were neither alike nor evenly balanced, there was no equipoise in any region of it; but it was everywhere swayed unevenly and shaken by these things, and by its motion shook them in turn. And they, being thus moved, were perpetually being separated and carried in different directions; just as when things are shaken and winnowed by means of winnowing-baskets and other instruments for cleaning corn, the dense and heavy things go one way, while the rare and light are carried to another place and settle there. In the same way at that time the four kinds were shaken by the *Receptacle*, which itself was in motion like an instrument for shaking, and it separated the most unlike kinds farthest apart from one another, and thrust the most alike closest together; whereby the different kinds came to have different regions, even before the ordered whole consisting of them came to be. Before that, all these kinds were without proportion or measure. Fire, water, earth, and air possessed indeed some *traces* of their own nature, but were altogether in such a condition as we should expect for anything when *God* is absent from it. Such being their nature at the time when the ordering of the universe was taken in hand, the god then began by giving them a distinct configuration by means of shapes and numbers. That the god framed them with the greatest possible perfection, which they had not before, must be taken, above all, as a principle we constantly assert; what I must now attempt to explain to you is the distinct formation of each and their origin. The account will be unfamiliar; but you are schooled in those branches of learning which my explanations require, and so will follow me.
Οὗτος μὲν οὖν δὴ παρὰ τῆς ἐμῆς ψήφου λογισθείς ἐν κεφαλαίῳ δεδόσθω λόγος, ὅν τε καὶ χώραν καὶ γένεσιν εἶναι, τρία τριχῆ, καὶ πρὶν οὕραναν γενέσθαι τὴν δὲ δὴ γενέσας τιθήνην ύγραινομένην καὶ πυρουμένην καὶ τὰς γῆς τε καὶ ἀέρας μορφὰς δεχομένην, καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα τούτοις πάθη συνέπεται πάσχουσαν, παντοδαπὴν μὲν ιδέαν φαίνεσθαι, διὰ δὲ τὸ μήθ' ὁμοίων δυνάμεων μήτε ἵπποψῴουν ἐμπίμπλασθαι καὶ οὐδὲν αὐτής ἰσορροπεῖν, ἀλλ' ἀνομάλους πάντη ταλαντουμένην σείεσθαι μὲν ὡς' ἐκείνουν αὐτήν, κινούμενην δ' αὐ πάλιν ἐκεῖνα σείειν· τὰ δὲ κινούμενα ἄλλα ἄλλοις ἀρίθμοις διακρινόμενα, ὡσπερ τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν πλοκάνων τε καὶ ὀργάστων τῶν περὶ τὴν τοῦ σίτου κάθαρσιν σείομενα καὶ ἀνικμώμενα τὰ μὲν πυκνὰ καὶ βαρέα, τὰ δὲ μανὰ καὶ κοῦφα εἰς ἅρπαν ζειμένα ἐδραν' τότε οὕτω τὰ τέτταρα γένη σείομενα ὡς' τῆς δεξαμενῆς, κινούμενης αὐτής ὡς' ὅργανος σειοῦσα· τὰ δὲ κινούμενα ἄλλα ἄλλοις ἀρίθμοις διακρινόμενα, ὡσπερ τὰ μὲν ἀνομοίότατα πλεῖστον αὐτὰ ἀφ' αὐτῶν ὀρίζειν, τὰ δὲ ὁμοίότατα μάλιστα εἰς ταῦτα συνοθεῖν, διὸ δὴ καὶ χώραν ταῦτα ἄλλα ἄλλην ἵσχειν, πρὶν καὶ τὸ πᾶν ἡ' αὐτῶν διακοσμηθὲν γενέσθαι. καὶ τὸ μὲν δὴ πρὸ τοῦτο πάντα ταῦτα ἡ' ἅγαν ἀλόγως καὶ ἀμέτρως; ὦτε δ' ἑπεχειρεῖτο κοσμεῖσθαι τὸ πᾶν, πῦρ πρῶτον καὶ ὁδὸν καὶ γῆν καὶ ἀέρα, ἵνα μὲν ἔχοντα αὐτῶν ἅττα, παντάπασι' γε μὴν διακείμενα ὡσπερ εἰκὸς ἔχειν ἅτταν ἃτταν ἄττα τοὺς θεοὺς, οὕτω δὴ τότε περικότα ταῦτα πρῶτον διεσχημάτισατο εἴδεςι τε καὶ ἀριθμοὶς, τὸ δ' ἓ ὅταν ὡς κάλλιστα ἄριστα ταῦτα ταῦτα τοὺς ὑπὸ ὅμοιος ὅτως ἐχόντων τὸν θεὸν αὐτὰ συνιστᾶναι, παρὰ πάντα ἅμιν ὡς ἀεὶ τοῦτο λεγόμενον ὑπαρχέτω· νῦν δ' οὖν τὴν διάταξιν αὐτῶν ἐπιχειρητέον ἐκάστων καὶ γένεσιν ἄρθει λόγῳ πρὸς ὑμᾶς δηλοῦν, ἅλλα γὰρ ἑπει μετέχετε τὸν κατὰ παῖδευσιν ὁδὸν δ' ὅν ἐνδείκνυσθαι τὰ λεγόμενα ἀνάγκη, συνέφεσθη. Translation after Cornford 1937; modifications are highlighted with asterisks.