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On Plato's Precosmos

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 λογισθεὶς ἐν κεφαλαίῳ δεδόσθω λόγος, ὃν τε καὶ χώραν καὶ γένεσιν εἶναι, τρία τριχῆ, καὶ πρὶν οὐρανὸν γενέσθαι· τὴν δὲ δὴ γενέσεως τιθήνην ὑγραιομένην καὶ πυρουμένην καὶ τὰς γῆς τε καὶ ἀέρος μορφὰς δεχομένην, καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα τούτοις πάθη συνέπεται πάσχουσαν, παντοδαπὴν μὲν ἰδεῖν φαίνεσθαι, διὰ δὲ τὸ μήθ' ὁμοίων δυνάμεων μήτε ἰσορρόπων ἐμπίπλασθαι κατ' οὐδὲν αὐτῆς ἰσορροπεῖν, ἀλλ' ἀνωμάλως πάντῃ ταλαντουμένην σειέσθαι μὲν ὑπ' ἐκείνων αὐτήν, κινουμένην δ' αὖ πάλιν ἐκεῖνα σείειν· τὰ δὲ κινούμενα ἄλλα ἄλλοσε ἀεὶ φέρεσθαι διακρινόμενα, ὥσπερ τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν πλοκάνων τε καὶ ὀργάνων τῶν περὶ τὴν τοῦ σίτου κάθαρσιν σειόμενα καὶ ἀνικνύμενα τὰ μὲν πυκνὰ καὶ βαρέα ἄλλη, τὰ δὲ μανὰ καὶ κοῦφα εἰς ἐτέραν ἵζει φερόμενα ἔδραν· τότε οὕτω τὰ τέτταρα γένη σειόμενα ὑπὸ τῆς δεξαμενῆς, κινουμένης αὐτῆς οἷον ὀργάνου σεισμὸν παρέχοντος, τὰ μὲν ἀνομοιότατα πλεῖστον αὐτὰ ἀφ' αὐτῶν ὀρίζειν, τὰ δὲ ὁμοιότατα μάλιστα εἰς ταῦτόν συνωθεῖν, διὸ δὴ καὶ χώραν ταῦτα ἄλλα ἄλλην ἴσχειν, πρὶν καὶ τὸ πᾶν ἐξ αὐτῶν διακοσμηθὲν γενέσθαι. καὶ τὸ μὲν δὴ πρὸ τούτου πάντα ταῦτ' εἶχεν ἀλόγως καὶ ἀμέτρως· ὅτε δ' ἐπεχειρεῖτο κοσμεῖσθαι τὸ πᾶν, πῦρ πρῶτον καὶ ὕδωρ καὶ γῆν καὶ ἀέρα, ἵχνη μὲν ἔχοντα αὐτῶν ἅττα, παντάπασί γε μὴν διακείμενα ὥσπερ εἰκὸς ἔχειν ἅπαν ὅταν ἀπῆ τινος θεός, οὕτω δὴ τότε πεφυκότα ταῦτα πρῶτον διεσχηματίσατο εἶδεσί τε καὶ ἀριθμοῖς. τὸ δὲ ἦ δυνατὸν ὡς κάλλιστα ἄριστα τε ἐξ οὐχ οὕτως ἐχόντων τὸν θεὸν αὐτὰ συνιστάναι, παρὰ πάντα ἡμῖν ὡς ἀεὶ τοῦτο λεγόμενον ὑπαρχέτω· νῦν δ' οὖν τὴν διάταξιν αὐτῶν ἐπιχειρητέον ἐκάστων καὶ γένεσιν ἀήθει λόγῳ πρὸς ὑμᾶς δηλοῦν, ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἐπεὶ μετέχετε τῶν κατὰ παιδείουσιν ὁδῶν δι' ὧν ἐνδείκνυσθαι τὰ λεγόμενα ἀνάγκη, συνέψεσθε. Translation after Cornford 1937; modifications are highlighted with asterisks.