



The Imaging Mechanism of the Three Precosmic Kinds in Plato's *Timaeus*

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Abstract

One of the most misunderstood elements of the cosmogonical account presented in Plato's dialogue Timaeus is the tripartite mechanism of imagery consisting of the Forms, phenomena, and the mysterious Receptacle. The metaphorical language utilized throughout the dialogue to illustrate the mechanism of imagery between these three precosmic kinds has led to diverse interpretations, including the possibility of a Platonic hylomorphism to clarify how the phenomenal objects of the world of becoming imitate the Forms of the world of being. However, this hylomorphic model of the imaging mechanism fails to consider the absolute characterlessness of the Receptacle and the constant substantial flux undergone by phenomenal objects. Accordingly, this paper argues that a medium model that understands the Receptacle to be a characterless medium in which various phenomena as insubstantial images of the Forms appear and disappear best explains the imaging mechanism. The phenomenal objects' lack of substantial identity and the Receptacle's unqualified imperviousness to any type of change remain intact in this medium model.

Introduction

In Plato's famous dialogue *Timaeus*, the interlocutor after whom the dialogue is named, engages in a long-winded speech that recounts in extensive detail how the current order of the cosmos came to be. The most recognizable component of this cosmogonical account is Timaeus' introduction of a creator god, a *demiurgos*, who arranges the phenomenal world as a whole in such a way that the organization of the phenomenal world imperfectly resembles the eternal world of the Forms (*Timaeus* 28a).¹ However, though this Platonic god plays a more general role in organizing the phenomenal world so that it exhibits some sort of overall structure, this craftsman is not utilized to explain how particular perceptible phenomenal objects resemble the Forms. This is the case, because the relation between the Forms and the phenomena partially elucidates how the latter resemble the former. These two kinds, the Forms and the phenomena, are set in opposition to one another at the very start of Timaeus' speech because the former eternally *are*, and the latter are subject to becoming (*Timaeus* 28a). Later in his speech, Timaeus presents a third kind that is described as "a receptacle of all becoming" (*Timaeus* 48e–49a). This third kind completes a tripartite mechanism of imagery. All three kinds are repeatedly described as precosmic to testify to their foundational importance in Timaeus' account.² Yet, how exactly Timaeus intended for these abstract kinds to interrelate is somewhat difficult to determine.

Evincing a noticeable degree of vagueness, the metaphors and metaphorical language Timaeus employs to describe the imaging mechanism between the three precosmic kinds are susceptible to numerous diverse interpretations. Moreover, at first glance, these metaphors seem to imply that a Platonic sort of hylomorphism explains the interrelation among the three precosmic kinds.³ However, Timaeus' equating of the Receptacle, *hypodokê*, with physical space, *chora*, seems to hint that the Receptacle operates as a medium. Accordingly, I maintain that these metaphors taken as a whole point to one of two models of the imaging mechanism. On the one hand, Timaeus intended for the Receptacle to be a sort of Platonic matter that combines with the essential characteristics of a Form to generate a hylomorphic unit which is the phenomenal object. On the other hand, Timaeus intended that the phenomenal object as an insubstantial image of the Form appears *within* the Receptacle that acts as a medium. In this paper, I argue that the medium model of the imaging mechanism involving the three precosmic kinds is correct because this model takes into account the absolute characterlessness of the Receptacle and the lack

1 Since the Greek word *demiurgos* was typically used to indicate a handicraftsman or sculptor, it is appropriate to think of Plato's *demiurgos* as a divine craftsman (Liddell and Scott 183).

2 These three kinds are precosmic because they existed before the *demiurgos* fashioned and arranged the general structure of the phenomenal world.

3 Aristotle invented the theory of hylomorphism, which claims that each physical object is a composite of matter and a particular form. In Section II, I outline the basics of Aristotle's hylomorphism in order to introduce a Platonic brand of hylomorphism that develops out of the hylomorphic readings of Timaeus' metaphors.

of substantial identity with regard to the phenomena. To argue in support of this thesis, in Section I, I will show how the medium model of the imaging mechanism naturally follows from the roles of the Receptacle and the phenomenal objects in Timaeus' dualism by delineating the reasons for both the phenomenal object's lack of substantial identity and the absolute characterlessness of the Receptacle. Accordingly, I will also offer a brief outline of the medium model. In Section II, I will address a counterargument which contends that the hylomorphic model of the imaging mechanism is supported by Timaeus' metaphors. In order to fully consider the inner workings and implications of this counterargument, I will both extensively outline the readings of Timaeus' metaphors that defend the correctness of the hylomorphic model, and advance a fully Platonic sort of hylomorphism. In Section III, I will respond to the counterargument by demonstrating that the hylomorphic model directly disregards the Receptacle's characterlessness and the insubstantiality of the phenomena. Further, this section will both show that the hylomorphic readings of the metaphors misapprehend the actual intentions of these metaphors and provide revised readings of these metaphors that perfectly coincide with the medium model. Ultimately, I will utilize the distinction between insubstantial and substantial images to propose a more developed version of the medium model.

Section I

Before launching into what exactly these precosmic kinds are and how they interrelate, I must first introduce the fundamental ontological distinction which shapes the entire direction of Timaeus' speech.⁴ The notion of substantial identity and what it means for the Receptacle to be absolutely characterless can only be explained within the overall context provided by this distinction. And it will eventually become clear how the precosmic kinds conform to this distinction. Timaeus' speech begins with the following opposition: being versus becoming. Fleshing out this distinction, Timaeus asserts that being is "that which always is and has no becoming," and becoming is "that which becomes but never is" (27d–28a). Defined as unqualified opposites of one another before Timaeus even launches into his explanation of the genesis of the universe, being and becoming are mutually exclusive ontological categories (Johansen 304). An implication of the absolute divergence of these two categories is that a thing or one of its properties cannot be a member of both categories at the same time and in the same fashion. It is inaccurate to employ the word *is* when talking about things that become, because Timaeus' usage of *is* conveys a sense of permanent stability and simplicity, and coming-to-be necessarily entails change (38a–b). Since being as such implicates unconditional changelessness in Timaeus' account, claiming that any particular thing or property that has at any point in the course of time changed in any degree whatsoever *is* leads to a conflation of two ontological

4 The discipline of ontology is centered around examining and categorizing being.

categories that must be considered opposed and separate.

Being as such bears certain defining features set in opposition to the defining features of the category of becoming as such. Changelessness is the primary characteristic of being. Throughout his recounting of the initial stage of the universe's genesis presented in 27d–29a, Timaeus repeatedly emphasizes that being as such and the things belonging to this category remain in a constant state that is not influenced by the incessant flux which permeates every aspect of the world in which humans live. Further specifying this category's distinct ontological status, Timaeus develops what this complete changelessness entails. Since moving from one physical location to another qualifies as a certain kind of change, being is motionless. Moreover, being as such never comes into being in, or disappears from, a certain location. Likewise, uninfluenced by the ceaseless movement of time towards the future, being "cannot become either older or younger in the course of time" (38a). It is impossible for this category to experience the passage of time in any fashion because if this were the case, it would be possible for being to change position across the expanse of time which stretches back into the past and forward into the future. Outside of the confines of both the chronological progression of time and physical movement from place to place, being as such simply and truly *is*. The eternity in which being exists is timeless and cannot be located.

In contrast, change in all its modes and degrees characterizes becoming. Becoming as an ontological category includes change both across time and in location. A chronological account can be implemented to describe becoming, since every case of coming-to-be begins with a specific origin point in time and requires a process that unfolds over a period of time. To rephrase, "*was* and *will be* are properly said about the becoming that passes in time" (*Timaeus* 38a). Just as a thing which comes into being appears at a certain moment in time, a thing belonging to this category must come into existence in a specific physical location. After appearing in an initial location, a thing of this kind "is constantly borne along" to different locations and eventually passes out of existence (*Timaeus* 52a). That is to say, becoming must occur in physical space and time.⁵ Likewise, becoming, as such, implicates qualitative change, defined as the fluctuation in the characteristics of a thing. For example, something belonging to the ontological category of becoming may abandon a certain color and take on a new color over time.

Timaeus' description of flux, evincing a truly Heraclitan spirit, does not solely entail that becoming only manifests itself in the alteration of characteristics, spatial position, and temporality.⁶ Critically, the intensity of the change that becoming as such undergoes ensures that every single thing to which this ontological category applies "is constantly becoming a new thing" (Johansen 301). In the cases of becoming as such and the things that belong to

⁵ Physical space, *chora*, is further developed on page 9.

⁶ Heraclitus' famous adage concerning the impossibility of stepping in the same river twice suggests that the incessant flux that all phenomenal objects endure prevents these objects from retaining substantial identities (Heraclitus, cited in Kirk et al. 195).

it, neither of these categories is maintained by its own respective substantial identity. I argue that substantial identity functions as that by which a thing is what it is.⁷ The substantial identity of a thing is what makes it possible for the thing to be correctly identified as a unified something distinct from other things. That becoming as such precludes any subject of becoming from possessing a substantial identity is proven by the sheer extent of becoming's effects. That is to say, confronted with a never-ending process of metamorphic change, all things transformed by becoming as such are always transmuting into each other (Mohr 140). In this ontological category, no single, identifiable entity stands apart from this all-embracing flux; no particular object existing in the phenomenal world withstands becoming as such and remains the same with respect to itself. All phenomenal objects are constantly becoming anew and have no substantial identity.⁸ This most radical mode of becoming, substantial change, is clarified in Timaeus' analysis of the four foundational elements.

Timaeus provides the example of the following four elements, which Presocratic natural philosophers often viewed to be the fundamental building blocks of the universe: water, fire, air, and earth. These supposedly most basic and simple elements follow a recurring pattern of transforming into one another without end; indeed, this transformative cycle, sharing in the rapid and all-encompassing nature of becoming as such, ensures that it is impossible to differentiate these elements from each other (49b–d). That is to say, what is often called “fire” and the other so-called foundational elements do not possess substantial identities that maintain their stability and identifiability. Moreover, the inability to identify correctly what each element is in the flux of the transformative cycle leads to logical absurdity. Because “a phenomenal object in and of itself can have any and all predications applied to it,” all these objects experiencing all-pervasive flux must be “subject to contradictory predications” (Mohr 140). There is no single, correct predication to apply to a phenomenal object because the object lacks any substantial identity that ensures that it is able to be correctly identified. Any of the phenomena of this elemental cycle can be equally called any of the names for the four elements, due to the substantial change that characterizes this cycle; and the application of all these names to a single phenomenon yields logical absurdity. A single phenomenon in this cycle is equally “fire,” “water,” “air,” or “earth.” This absurdity further highlights the impossibility of correctly pinpointing what a particular thing subject to becoming is, and the lack of substantial identity with regard to anything subject to becoming. In general, change is the fulcrum about which Timaeus' entire understanding of ontology turns. The ontological categories of becoming as such and being as such constitute Timaeus' fundamental dualism.

This dualism, which can seem somewhat abstract, becomes more

⁷ Although my understanding of substantial identity, which I believe is implied in this dialogue, avoids the intricacies of Aristotle's essence, my understanding does bear some similarities to his basic conception of essence (e.g., *Metaphysics* 1029b).

⁸ To clarify, a phenomenal object is simply something that is perceived with the bodily senses.

evident when the precosmic kinds which correspond with each category are outlined. All the Forms belong to the ontological category of being. An individual Form functions as the original model for numerous imperfect likenesses in the phenomenal world, which are called, in everyday parlance, by the same name as the original Form (*Timaeus* 52b). Specifically, all individual horses, which can be observed in the phenomenal world, imitate and resemble the atemporal and aspatial Form, Horse itself. It is impossible for these Forms, dwelling in the simple and complete eternity of being as such, to be restricted by time or space. Moreover, a Form exists as a self-subsistent, self-consistent, and self-contained unit independent of all other things, including the other Forms. A Form unchangeably is itself “by itself” (*Timaeus* 51c). To put it another way, Forms are simply and eternally their own substantial identities. Accordingly, in the example of the four supposedly foundational elements, the correct referent for the name “fire” is always “the Form of fire, which, as we learn at 51b–e, exists over and above perceptible fire” (Gill 47). The Form does have a single predication which can be said of it and belongs to the ontological category of being as such.

These Forms, which exist on the ontological level of being, are contrasted with the perceptible things of the phenomenal world that belong to the ontological level of becoming and are images of the Forms. An individual horse, born as a foal at a particular moment in time and exhibiting various characteristics and local movements at different moments in time, will eventually disintegrate out of existence and no longer resemble Horse itself. The constant flux undergone by this particular horse which takes on numerous forms, including spatial, temporal, qualitative, and substantial change, proves that the horse “never really *is*” (*Timaeus* 28a, emphasis added). Further, inasmuch as the particular horse, which maintains no substantial identity, is an indistinguishable part of the comprehensive cosmic flux, correctly identifying the particular horse is an impossibility. Timaeus’ application of the clear-cut demarcation of being from becoming to the structure of the universe yields two utterly distinct and separate worlds: the eternal world of the Forms and the phenomenal world of becoming.

Chiefly, there is a third precosmic kind which does not undermine the mutually exclusive dualism of being and becoming. Much later in his speech, Timaeus, further developing his dualism, asserts the need for a mysterious “third kind,” functioning as “a receptacle of all becoming,” in addition to the changeless Forms and the ceaselessly fluctuating perceptible objects (49a). The Receptacle, which Timaeus deems to be physical space, acts as “a fixed state” *in* which all forms and degrees of coming-to-be and passing-away occur (52a–b). As discussed earlier in the analysis of becoming as such, a generated phenomenal object comes into existence at a certain physical location, and local movements from place to place are typical of this object before it fades out of existence. Such phenomena are always seen and perceived by the bodily senses within three-dimensional space; moreover, space itself in its entirety is the Receptacle. A

particular foal appears at the moment of its birth at some physical place X in the Receptacle as opposed to any of the other physical places within the Receptacle and moves throughout the Receptacle during its time of imaging Horse itself.

To support the absolute permanence of this mysterious kind in contrast to generated phenomena, Timaeus offers a metaphor:

Suppose you were molding gold into every shape there is, going on non-stop remolding one shape into the next. If someone then were to point at one of them and ask you, “What *is* it?,” your safest answer by far, with respect to truth, would be to say, “gold,” but never “triangle” or any of the other shapes that come to be in the gold, as though it *is* these, because they change even while you’re making the statement. (50a–b)

Applying this analogy to the world of becoming and the Receptacle, I argue that the unending process of constant molding and remolding illustrates the world of becoming. Just as the shapes appear and disappear in the gold, the phenomena of the world of becoming appear and disappear in the Receptacle. Moreover, a shape incessantly transmutes into other shapes even at a moment when a misleading determinative assertion is made of it. Likewise, a phenomenal object experiences such an extreme degree of substantial change at all times that it is impossible to speak of the object as though it were a simple unified entity that could be considered definitionally and existentially separate from the radical flux of becoming. In other words, to answer categorically that what the observer is pointing to is a “triangle” is absurd, since the “triangle” never really *is* in the full sense of being as such. There is no triangle or generated phenomenal object that continually remains the same and to which determinative assertions can be applied.

In contrast, if someone were to gesture at a generated phenomenal object and strive to identify what it was, the most appropriate response would be to maintain that it is the Receptacle, since this third kind “is what is permanent in the context of flux” (Gill 47). In accordance with the metaphor which emphasizes the permanence of gold in the face of the ever-changing shapes, the Receptacle “does not depart from its own character in any way” despite the flux occurring within it (*Timaeus* 50b). However, it is critical to determine to which ontological category this third kind belongs. The Receptacle refrains from undergoing any substantial change by remaining the same with respect to its own substantial identity; it simply is what it is without change. Any degree of change in its characteristics is impossible, since to be the Receptacle is to be without fail “totally devoid of any characteristics” (*Timaeus* 50e). Accordingly, the Receptacle, not acquiring or abandoning certain characteristics, remains absolutely characterless and formless in accordance with its substantial identity. In brief, the Receptacle’s permanence is necessarily bound up with its absolute characterlessness.

Moreover, since the Receptacle is physical space in its entirety, this kind cannot be described as some sort of generated object that moves from place to place and must be motionless. Likewise, space considered in its entirety cannot be, by definition, spatial in the sense of taking up or being in a certain physical space. Unfortunately, Timaeus does not offer a thorough explanation of the timelessness of the Receptacle in his presentation of this third kind. Nevertheless, summarizing this presentation, Timaeus maintains that the Receptacle “exists always and cannot be destroyed” (52a–b). I argue that this eternality the Receptacle experiences should not be interpreted as an unending expanse of time in which the Receptacle ceaselessly proceeds towards the future. Instead, tacitly drawing from his previous analysis of the timelessness of being, Timaeus supposes that the Receptacle’s state of perpetual existence is the same state enjoyed by the Forms and being as such. The Receptacle remains the same outside of the passage of time. In addition, the indestructibility of the Receptacle reinforces its fixed, absolute, and immovable fidelity to its own substantial identity. Because the Receptacle does not in any degree undergo spatial, temporal, qualitative, or substantial change, it is safe to confirm that becoming as such does not characterize the Receptacle. Consequently, the Receptacle belongs to the only other ontological category, being as such, and it is appropriate to state that this third kind *is*. In sum, there are three precosmic kinds: the Forms, the Receptacle, and phenomenal objects (48e–49a, 50c–d, 52d). Further, although there are three separate precosmic kinds, there are still only two ontological categories, which happen to be mutually exclusive: being and becoming.

In light of this analysis that both extensively describes the three precosmic kinds and addresses how Timaeus’ dualism applies to these kinds, the medium model of how these kinds interrelate in the imaging mechanism that necessarily involves them comes to light. While the Receptacle is not itself altered by the becoming that takes place within it, it still functions as a characterless three-dimensional medium that houses all the various manifestations of becoming. The phenomenal object, which has no substantial identity of its own, appears *in* this characterless medium as an image of its respective Form. Importantly, the phenomenal object is not awarded any degree of identifiability or stability by virtue of its resemblance to the Form. That this is the case is proven by the futility of striving to identify a phenomenal object; without exception, all phenomenal objects cannot be distinguished from the indeterminate, all-pervasive flux of the world of becoming. According to the medium model of the imaging mechanism involving all three precosmic kinds, the phenomenal object, constantly becoming anew, is a transitory, contentless appearance *in* the Receptacle that imitates a particular Form for a brief period of time.

I have demonstrated that Timaeus’ mutually exclusive dualism between being and becoming lays the ontological groundwork for understanding the Receptacle, the Forms, and phenomenal objects. Further, my analysis

of becoming, which explicates the various types of change, has shown that a phenomenal object does not have a substantial identity, due to the substantial change it experiences. In addition, while describing the imperviousness of the Receptacle to all types of change, I have elucidated that the Receptacle always stays true to its substantial identity which consists in absolute characterlessness. A medium model of the tripartite imaging mechanism accounting for the substantial identity of the Receptacle and the insubstantiality of the phenomena has been presented. However, if Timaeus' gold metaphor is examined more closely, a weighty objection to my argument arises.

While the gold does persist through the incessant molding and remolding, this metaphorical analogue to the Receptacle obviously *changes* in this molding process by taking on the appearance of the geometric shapes. The gold's capacity to change directly contradicts the absolute characterless of the Receptacle; consequently, the gold metaphor seems to suggest that the medium model does not best explain the imaging mechanism of the three precosmic kinds. Further, other metaphors Timaeus utilizes to describe the character and function of the Receptacle also appear to bring into question the correctness of the medium model.

Section II

The inherent slipperiness of all metaphorical language makes it all the more difficult to grab onto what exactly Timaeus wanted his metaphors to illuminate about the interrelation of the three precosmic kinds. After reading these metaphors for the first time, I firmly believed that these metaphors illustrated that the Receptacle fulfills a similar role to matter in Aristotle's hylomorphism. Accordingly, I maintain that these metaphors are especially susceptible to readings that uphold the hylomorphic model.

I must now return to the gold metaphor in order to explain more fully how it appears to undermine my argument. In this metaphor that emphasizes the Receptacle's ontological status, the gold is continuously shaped and molded into a variety of shapes (*Timaeus* 50a). Addressing a reading of this analogy which suggests that the Receptacle is meant to be understood as "a permanent substratum," Gill asserts, "From this analogy one could think that the [R]eceptacle is matter for the things that come to be, as gold is matter for things made out of gold" (45). The gold is the physical element out of which the shapes are molded; consequently, the Receptacle serves as a sort of stable material out of which the perceivable objects of the phenomenal world are formed (Mohr 147). Further, the application of this reading of the analogy to the interrelation of the precosmic kinds indicates that a particular generated phenomenon is "a modification of a permanent substratum" that imitates a specific Form (Gill 45). Timaeus appears to continue with this idea of the Receptacle as a malleable and constitutive material in his perfume metaphor.

Describing the Receptacle, Timaeus compares this third kind to the base liquids that perfume producers utilize to create various distinctive perfumes; a base liquid like this must be completely odorless so that it can receive a fragrance without mixing its own odor with the fragrance (50e). The base liquid, in receiving the fragrance, is altered by the fragrance in such a way as to exhibit the odor of the fragrance; accordingly, the result of this alteration is a perfume that is a new reformation of the base liquid that has taken on the odor qualities of the fragrance. If my interpretation of the metaphor above is applied to the imaging mechanism between the three precosmic kinds, then the Receptacle is a characterless base material, which in its reception of the Forms is altered by them. A particular Form's active transformation of the Receptacle produces a phenomenal object, which images the Form, since it has adopted the characteristics of the Form.

Moreover, Timaeus' usage of metaphorical language to describe the interaction between the Forms and the Receptacle appears further to hint at the material function of the Receptacle. The Receptacle is "imprinted," "modified," and "shaped" by the Forms (50c). On a *prima facie* reading, these verbs appear to continue this theme of the Receptacle's materiality. Further, in this same passage from 50c–e, "the description of the third thing as an [*ekmageion*]," which means "a soft substance capable of receiving impressions," seemingly implies that the Receptacle's reception of the Form involves the Receptacle being changed by the Form (Mohr 145). This particular understanding of the Receptacle as a basic, constitutive, and impressionable material brings to mind Aristotle's conception of matter.

In Book II of his *Physics*, Aristotle outlines his basic understanding of causation, and the material and formal causes described therein provide a basic framework for his hylomorphism.⁹ The material cause is "that out of which as a constituent a thing comes to be" (*Physics* 194b). Aristotle, providing numerous examples of this wide-reaching cause, contends that the bronze out of which a statue is formed or the letters out of which a syllable is created both serve as material causes (194b–195a). Continuing the horse example, the matter of a horse is its flesh, bones, and hair. In any case of determining the matter of an individual entity, the matter is the underlying material which the form of the entity shapes and informs. The formal cause is "the account of what the being would be" (194b). That is to say, the form is the immaterial principle after which an individual entity is modeled, and the unity of an individual entity "is achieved through the transformation of the material parts into a whole according to the principle of the substantial form" (Marmodoro 17, 19). In its shaping of bones,

9 I acknowledge the obvious resemblance between the characterless Receptacle and the Aristotelian notion of Prime Matter. However, the need to address the scholarly controversy over whether Aristotle truly endorsed this notion in his philosophical system ensures that an investigation of the similarities between the Receptacle and Prime Matter falls outside of the scope of this paper. For more on the scholarly debate, see Robinson's "Prime Matter in Aristotle" and Graham's "The Paradox of Prime Matter."

flesh, and hair, the form of horse unifies this matter into an individual entity, which is a particular horse. Accordingly, the resultant horse or any individual entity within Aristotle's hylomorphic system "is a composite of matter and form, and yet [is] one" (Marmodoro 20). Crucially, form, fulfilling its essential role in the formation of the individual entity by acting as the unifying principle, and matter, serving as the malleable material out of which the individual entity is formed, both inhere within the entity. The composite of form and matter is the foundational unit of Aristotle's hylomorphism.

Of course, no matter how accommodating the readings of Timaeus' metaphors highlighted above are with respect to viewing the Receptacle as a kind of Platonic matter, Aristotle's understanding of metaphysics does not perfectly map onto Timaeus' presentation of the three kinds. For example, Aristotle contends that the form actualizes the matter, which possesses the potential to be shaped by the form into a composite (Marmodoro 20). Aristotle's intricate notions of actuality and potentiality are not directly paralleled by the imaging mechanism involving the Forms, the phenomenal world, and the Receptacle. Moreover, although Plato's Forms and Aristotle's forms are both associated with serving as models for phenomenal objects, there are numerous differences between the characteristics exhibited by each. For example, the atemporal and aspatial eternity of the Forms, that testifies to the unqualified separation of the world of the Forms from the everyday world of becoming, does not seem to be a primary concern of Aristotle in his description of form. In fact, Aristotle generally insists upon the form being necessarily inseparable from matter. Nonetheless, in light of Aristotle's hylomorphism and the readings of Timaeus' metaphors that highlight the materiality of the Receptacle, a particularly Platonic form of hylomorphism is a viable option for explaining the imaging mechanism.

A Platonic model of hylomorphism inspired by Timaeus' metaphors implicates demonstrating that the imaging mechanism between all three precosmic kinds involves the Form imprinting its essential characteristics upon the Receptacle to create a specific phenomenal object. Accordingly, the resultant phenomenal object would be a hylomorphic unit composed of the Form's essential characteristics and the Receptacle. To be clear, I am not suggesting that a Platonic hylomorphism of this sort would implicate the Form itself operating as a constituent in the hylomorphic structure of a generated phenomenon. If this were the case, Timaeus would be endorsing an utterly absurd hylomorphism, in which the otherworldly, eternal Forms that belong to the ontological category of being would not only interact with the ever-fluctuating phenomenal world inundated by becoming. The Forms would also function as actual components of the world of becoming. In other words, the unconditional distinction between being and becoming would be haphazardly blurred, and I assume that Timaeus would not be so misguided as to propose an understanding of the imaging mechanism that explicitly violates the very dualism that he emphasizes throughout his speech. If a hylomorphic model of the imaging mechanism is plausibly to explain this

mechanism, it must not recklessly abandon Timaeus' mutually exclusive dualism. Accordingly, I argue that a Platonic sort of hylomorphism that expresses the highest degree of explanatory power is the model which considers the role of Aristotelian matter to be fulfilled by the Receptacle and, further, note the parallel of the Aristotelian form to be the essential characteristics of the Platonic Form.

The interpretations of Timaeus' metaphors that emphasize the materiality of the Receptacle support this model of Platonic hylomorphism. As I have shown, the gold and perfume metaphors can be read in such a way that the Receptacle is understood to be a basic constitutive material out of which phenomenal objects are formed. This material function, illustrated by Timaeus' metaphorical language which highlights the Receptacle's malleability, highlights the capacity of the Receptacle to be changed and shaped into something; moreover, as particularly shown in the perfume example, the Receptacle must be formless to be available to be informed by "any of those characters that it is to receive from elsewhere" (*Timaeus* 50e). Further, that which shapes the Receptacle as an indeterminate *ekmageion* is the Form. Timaeus describes the phenomenal objects of the perceptible world as "imitations of those things that always *are*, imprinted after their likeness in a marvelous way that is hard to describe" (*Timaeus* 50c, emphasis added). According to this hylomorphic model, through the process of the Form stamping its essential characteristics upon the Receptacle, the Receptacle is reformed into a particular phenomenon that now exhibits the essential characteristics of the Form. Crucially, this hylomorphism necessarily demands that the characteristics bestowed upon the phenomenon are the characteristics essential to the Form as the specific Form it is, not the characteristics essential to the Form as a Form generally. If the Form was to impress the essential characteristics it possesses due to its general status as a Form upon the Receptacle, then the resultant phenomenon would receive the characteristics of absolute aspatiality and atemporality. Accordingly, a violation of the strict dualism between being and becoming would ensue. Instead, Horse itself shapes the Receptacle by impressing the essential characteristics that it possesses *qua* Horse itself, such as four-legged-ness and warm-blooded-ness, upon it. The result of this interaction between Horse itself and the Receptacle is a particular horse, which resembles Horse itself due to it exhibiting essential characteristics that it received from Horse itself. That is to say, the particular phenomenal horse would be a hylomorphic unit composed of the Receptacle and the relevant essential characteristics of Horse itself.

While examining the various metaphors Timaeus utilizes to illustrate the imaging mechanism, I have established that these metaphors seemingly teach that the Receptacle is a material substratum out of which the phenomena are composed. Moreover, I have put forward a basic outline of Aristotle's hylomorphism and have shown that a Platonic form of hylomorphism meant to explain the imaging mechanism must not flippantly overlook Timaeus' dualism. Thereafter, I have described a fully Platonic hylomorphism inspired by Timaeus'

metaphors. Even though this Platonic hylomorphism is both alluring and unique, this hylomorphism as an explanatory model for the imaging mechanism of the three precosmic kinds does not hold up against scrutiny. For one thing, this hylomorphism discounts the absolute characterlessness of the Receptacle.

Section III

When the material function of the Receptacle in the hylomorphic model is more closely investigated, an obvious problem with this model becomes evident. Timaeus clearly underscores that the Receptacle is impervious to change. This third kind remains true to its own substantial identity despite serving as a three-dimensional medium for the various manifestations of becoming. As I established in Section I, the substantial identity of the Receptacle consists in its remaining entirely characterless. Refraining at all times from taking on characteristics from anything else, this precosmic kind remains characterless without qualification (*Timaeus* 50c). The hylomorphic model explicitly disregards the Receptacle's unqualified fidelity to its own substantial identity by claiming that this kind assumes the essential characteristics of the Forms. Furthermore, since the coming-to-be and passing-away of a phenomenal object unfold over a period of time, and the Receptacle within the hylomorphic model is an essential part of the generation and disintegration of a phenomenal object, the Receptacle is firmly enmeshed in the chronological progression of time. Accordingly, the hylomorphic model rejects the timelessness of the Receptacle. The Receptacle's unique role as space in its entirety is also ignored by the Platonic brand of hylomorphism, which claims that the Receptacle is not something *in* which phenomena appear. Rather, the Receptacle is a basic material *out of* which phenomena are composed. However, the most cataclysmic failure of this model concerning its view of the Receptacle is its refusal to accept the absolute characterlessness of the Receptacle. This particular misapprehension about the true nature of the Receptacle demonstrates that the hylomorphic model is not the correct model of the imaging mechanism involving the three precosmic kinds.

Furthermore, this hylomorphic model mistakenly claims that a phenomenal object will possess a substantial identity for some amount of time. According to this model, the impression of the Forms' essential characteristics on the Receptacle endows the phenomenon with unity and stability. Indeed, once a Form has stamped the Receptacle, the resultant phenomenon is an individual entity with its own Platonic matter along with characteristics that maintain its resemblance to its respective Form. As long as this phenomenal object retains the characteristics it shares with its Form, it possesses a substantial identity. Crucially, under this model of Platonic hylomorphism, the phenomenal object does not retain its substantial identity indefinitely. The separate and unified existence the Form awards to the phenomenal object is not secure (Lee 355). Once substantial change overwhelms the phenomenon so that it no longer

exhibits the essential characteristics of its Form, it loses its substantial identity and is no longer an identifiable hylomorphic unit. Nevertheless, any claim that a phenomenal object possesses a substantial identity in any way whatsoever is misleading since, as proven by the example of the four elements, all phenomena lack substantial identity. As a result, this hylomorphic model must be incorrect due to its insistence on the substantiality of the phenomena.

The interpretations of Timaeus' metaphors which support the hylomorphic model miss the key intentions of these metaphors. Although Timaeus does explicitly consider gold to be the material constituent of the gold shapes, this material function of the gold "is not the relevant aspect of the gold that is being compared to space" (Mohr 147). I argue that the molding of the gold as a constituent is merely included to set the stage for the main implication of the metaphor. Timaeus introduces the metaphor to contrast the insubstantiality of the phenomena with the absolute permanence of the Receptacle (Mohr 147). The constant remolding of the gold into various shapes, highlighting both the substantial change experienced by all generated phenomenal objects and the resulting inability to say anything definitive of phenomenal objects, is what Timaeus intends to be the focus of this metaphor. Rather than supporting the hylomorphic model which argues in support of the substantial identity of the phenomenal object, this metaphor accentuates the phenomenal object's lack of substantial identity.

The brevity of the perfume metaphor ensures that this metaphor is equally susceptible to a hylomorphic reading or to a reading that coincides with the insubstantiality of phenomena. All this metaphor explicitly stresses is the requirement that the Receptacle must be formless so that it can receive imprints from the Forms. However, as I demonstrated in my objection to the hylomorphic model concerning the nature of the Receptacle, this model does not adequately uphold the absolute characterlessness of the Receptacle. Accordingly, I contend that the hylomorphic interpretation of this metaphor, which mistakenly suggests that the Receptacle takes on characteristics from the Form, is a misreading of this metaphor. Instead, the correct reading of this metaphor, one that considers the true nature of the Receptacle, highlights the inability of the Receptacle to lose its characterlessness.

Additionally, the metaphorical language that seems to support the hylomorphic model actually supports the Receptacle's function as a medium. At first glance, the language of "imprinting" and "receiving" used to describe the relation between the Forms and the Receptacle seems to directly lead to the hylomorphic model. However, elsewhere in the *Timaeus* at 71b and in Plato's dialogue the *Theaetetus*, language of impression and reception is employed to describe how a mirror reflects what is impressed upon it or what it receives from outside itself (Lee 357). Accordingly, I maintain that instead of pointing to the materiality of the Receptacle, this metaphorical language underlines the true function of the Receptacle as a medium in which images appear as

reflections. The imprinting of the Forms on the Receptacle is best described as the Forms being reflected by the Receptacle. The *ekmageion* receives the Forms by reflecting them. Viewing the Receptacle as a mirror-like medium brings to mind the distinction between insubstantial and substantial images, which further illumines the intricacies of the interrelation among the three kinds.

This distinction in image types will allow me to advance a more nuanced version of the medium model of the imaging mechanism among all three precosmic kinds. However, I must first describe this distinction. While dutifully striving to analyze imagery from a more comprehensive perspective, Lee outlines two image types: substantial and insubstantial. Importantly, an image must fall into one of these two foundational categories. While a substantial image can continue to exist even after the original it images passes out of existence, an insubstantial image, wholly dependent on its original, ceases to exist as soon as the original no longer stands in “a continuing relation” with it (Lee 353). “[S]tatues, paintings, photographs, footprints, and fossils” are easily recognizable instances of the substantial kind of image, and “shadows, mirror images, and reflections in water” are common examples of the insubstantial kind (Lee 353). A self-portrait painted by Van Gogh long outlives the unfortunate demise of the famous painter it represents. In contrast, exemplifying the absolute dependence of insubstantial images on their originals, my reflected image in a mirror immediately disappears as soon as I move away from my position in front of the mirror. Additionally, destruction of the mirror itself would immediately result in the disappearance of my reflected image. My reflected image cannot survive the destruction of either its original or the medium which houses it. In all cases, insubstantial images “have no reality ‘on their own,’ but wholly derive their being from their original and from the medium in which they appear” (Lee 353). In other words, coming to be at one moment and disappearing at another, an insubstantial image is merely a contentless phantom that does not belong to the ontological level of being as such and which never truly *is*.

This absolute ontological dependence on the medium and the original exemplified by all insubstantial images demonstrates that this type of image lacks substantial identity. As I explained in Section I, the substantial identity of a thing is what ensures that the thing stands apart from other things as something distinct and unified. A thing’s substantial identity provides the thing with some sort of ontological independence along with a capacity to be identified correctly by means of correct predication. In light of this understanding of substantial identity, an insubstantial image does not possess a substantial identity because an image of this kind cannot exist separately from its medium and original. Accordingly, it is absurd to single out a reflected image in a pond with the purpose of asserting that this reflection is distinct from its respective original or the pond in any meaningful way. This pond reflection is a transient and ephemeral shadow that escapes any attempt to identify it as a unified and distinct entity. To put it another way, strictly speaking, an insubstantial image should not be viewed as

a *this*, an identifiable something, which happens to be loosely associated with its original. On the other hand, exhibiting ontological independence from its original, the substantial image possesses a substantial identity by which it can be correctly identified. Van Gogh's self-portrait, existing without relying on a continual relation to its original, can be identified as a unified entity distinct from Van Gogh himself.

The misleading hylomorphic model necessarily demands that phenomena are substantial images because a phenomenal object in this model is ontologically independent from its original Form as soon as it receives the relevant essential characteristics from its original Form. To rephrase, the phenomenal object is a distinct hylomorphic unit that exists separately from its original Form even though it still resembles its original Form. If in some extraordinary turn of events all the Forms were destroyed at one moment in time, all the phenomena generated before this destruction would continue to exist. However, "ontologically independent" does not seem to be an apt description of a phenomenal object. If the absolute characterlessness of the Receptacle and the insubstantiality of the phenomena are taken into consideration, and the imprinting process upon the Receptacle is understood to be a process of reflection in a mirror-like medium, then it becomes quite clear that it is more appropriate to describe the phenomena as insubstantial images.

Becoming as such, in all its degrees and kinds, unfolds within the Receptacle without altering the Receptacle itself; moreover, all the generated phenomenal objects, which humans are accustomed to seeing and perceiving, come into and pass out of this eternal characterless medium. Importantly, these phenomena, including even the four foundational elements, have no real substantial identity of their own due to the overwhelming presence of substantial change in the phenomenal world of becoming. Accordingly, nothing definitive can be said of these phenomenal objects; striving to apply any sort of predicate to them leads to confusion. They do not enjoy the ontological independence that necessarily accompanies the possession of substantial identity; that is to say, they do not qualify to be substantial images. As a result, they must be images of the opposite kind since these phenomenal objects do in fact image the Forms. The question then arises: how exactly do the phenomena appear in and vanish out of the Receptacle as insubstantial images of the Forms?

Acknowledging that phenomenal objects are insubstantial images, I will now offer a more developed version of my model of the imaging mechanism presented in Section I. The brief appearance of a phenomenal object *in* the Receptacle is entirely brought about by a joint causation. The Form, acting as the original of the phenomenal object, projects an insubstantial image of itself into space for a certain period of time; further, once this act of projection is discontinued, the image abruptly disappears (Mohr 146). The Receptacle, which is space in its entirety, is a sort of three-dimensional mirror into which the Form projects (Lee 357). The joint production of the Form and the Receptacle

is a three-dimensional reflected insubstantial image, which is the phenomenal object. Accordingly, the phenomenon is ontologically dependent on both the Receptacle and the Form, and the appearance of the phenomenon only occurs when the phenomenon stands in a continual relation to both the Receptacle and the Form. “Somehow clinging to being,” the phenomenal object, belonging to the ontological category of becoming as such, derives its entire existence from the two precosmic kinds belonging to the ontological category of being as such (*Timaeus* 52c).

Insubstantiality, by definition, resists most attempts to describe it. Mohr, however, perfectly summarizes this world of insubstantial images. He asserts, “If Plato had lived into our century he might very well have chosen, not gold, but a movie screen or television screen as his analogue to a field across which ceaselessly changing non-substantial images may flicker” (148). Everyday phenomena, such as a particular horse or one of the four elements, may seem to be identifiable entities. But all phenomena, having no real existence of their own, receive their brief, transient existence entirely from the Receptacle and the Forms. Although humans think that the phenomenal objects they see, feel, and taste are stable for at least some period of time, phenomenal objects are ever-fleeting, contentless phantoms incessantly flickering in and out of the mirror-like medium which houses them.

Conclusion

Overall, I have proven that the medium model is the most viable option for describing the imaging mechanism, since this model accords with the characterless nature of the Receptacle and the insubstantiality of the phenomena. In Section I, while investigating the ontological status of the Receptacle, I confirmed the absolute characterlessness of this third kind; moreover, I described the overwhelming substantial change that prevents phenomenal objects from possessing substantial identities. In addition, I offered a basic outline of the medium model. In Section II, I extensively detailed how a Platonic hylomorphic model of the tripartite imaging mechanism might arise out of certain hylomorphic readings of *Timaeus*’ metaphors. In Section III, I definitively established the inaccuracy of this hylomorphic model by showing that this model requires both the Receptacle to take on characteristics from the Forms and the phenomena to possess substantial identities. Additionally, I dutifully broke down Lee’s distinction in image types and employed this distinction to pose a version of the medium model that considers the phenomena to be insubstantial images. As a result, this expanded conception of the medium model clarifies the ontological dependence of the phenomena on both the Forms and the Receptacle.

If the medium model is the most viable model for describing the tripartite mechanism concerning the three precosmic kinds, then numerous further implications of my argument materialize. First, if the medium model

of the three precosmic kinds in Plato's *Timaeus* is compared to the extensive description of the tension between an image and its original in Plato's *Republic*, then it becomes strikingly clear that Plato's understanding of the phenomenon-Form relationship is not consistent across all of his dialogues. Crucially, the esteemed divided line metaphor in Book VI of the *Republic* primarily focuses on investigating how the phenomena image the Forms and does not incorporate an image-bearing medium in which the perceptible phenomena appear into its broad schema of representation. In addition, in the divided line metaphor, phenomenal objects are awarded a certain degree of ontological independence from their original forms and possess substantial identities. In other words, in the *Republic*, which noticeably fails to make use of the Receptacle, the phenomena are considered to be substantial images. My interpretive argument, which confirms the insubstantiality of the phenomena and which highlights the unique function of the Receptacle in Plato's conception of imagery in the *Timaeus*, can be utilized to track the continuities and discontinuities between the medium model of the imaging mechanism of the three precosmic kinds and the divided line metaphor in the *Republic*. Accordingly, if my thesis is brought into conversation with scholarship on other Platonic dialogues, then the Receptacle and the notion of insubstantiality can be employed to further develop a systematic theory of Plato's Forms that considers his entire corpus.

Second, my extensive analysis of the impossibility of correctly identifying a phenomenal object might shed light on *Timaeus*' epistemological distinction between knowledge and perception.¹⁰ While arguing in support of the existence of the Forms, *Timaeus* maintains that the Forms are the sole objects of knowledge and argues that phenomena are merely perceived by the bodily senses (51b–e). The lack of substantial identity with regard to the phenomena ensures that the phenomena cannot qualify to be objects of knowledge. The ever-present flux of the world of becoming, which necessarily involves that all phenomenal objects undergo substantial change, prevents humans from knowing anything about the phenomenal world. In short, my explanation of the radical effects of becoming has a considerable impact on the possibility of acquiring knowledge.

¹⁰ Epistemology involves studying the nature of knowledge and humans' access to knowledge.

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