"Auf diese Weise nun gebe ich selbst meine Stimme ab" - Einige Bemerkungen zu Platons später Ideenlehre unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des `Timaios`

Ferber, Rafael

Abstract: In the whole Corpus Platonicum, we find in principle only one “direct argument” (Charles Kahn) for the existence of the ideas (Tim.51d3-51e6). The purpose of the article is to analyse this argument and to answer the question of why Plato in the Timaeus again defended the existence of the ideas despite the objections in the Parmenides. He defended it again because the latent presupposition of the apories in the Parmenides, the substantial view of sensibles, is removed through the introduction of space as “substantialized extension”. First (I) it is shown that Plato remained, in dialogues, like the Sophist and Politicus, faithful to the “theory of ideas” despite his criticism in the Parmenides. The common theme in the trilogy of the Theaetetus, Sophist and Politicus is to refute relativism by showing that any relativism presupposes something absolute that is something like the “theory of ideas”. The second part of the paper (II) examines closely the logical structure of the argument for the existence of ideas in the Timaeus (51d3-52a7). The third part (III) shows how this argument can avoid the criticism of ideas in the Parmenides. In the Parmenides, sensibles are treated as substantial entities. But, as the Timaeus shows, sensibles are not substantial entities but merely qualities, namely qualities of space, which is the only substance in the sensible world. Italian version: “Perché Platone nel Timeo torna a sostenere la dottrina delle idee”, in: Elenchos, Rivista di studi sul pensiero antico, 18, 1997, Fascicolo 1, 5-27. Shortened English version „Why did Plato maintain the ,Theory of Ideas in the "Timaeus"?,“ in: Proceedings of the Fourth Symposium Platonicum”, Granada, Selected papers, ed. by T. Calvo/L. Brisson, Academia Verlag, St. Augustin, 1997, 179-186. But the only “direct argument” (Tim.51d3-51e6) seems to be interestingly flawed. Cf. Ferber, Rafael; Hiltbrunner, Thomas, (2005): http://www.zora.uzh.ch/64891

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A Conrado Eggers

In memoriam

En nombre de los compiladores y autores, así como de la Sociedad Internacional de Platonistas, dedicamos este libro a la memoria de Conrado Eggers Lan.


Su investigación y publicaciones en el ámbito de la filosofía griega, y particularmente en el ámbito del platonismo, son amplias y valiosas. Muestras de ello son sus traducciones cumplidamente anotadas (Ed. Eudeba) del Fedón, Apología de Sócrates, Critón y los pasajes correspondientes de la República en El sol, la línea y la caverna, así como la República (Ed. Gredos, Madrid). Junto a estas obras merecen destacarse la edición y traducción anotada del hipocrático Sobre la medicina antigua (Ed. UNAM, México) y el más reciente volumen sobre El origen de la matemática en Grecia (Ed. Eudeba, 1995).

Mucho debemos y reconocemos los platonistas a Conrado Eggers, entre otras cosas el haber organizado el Primer Simposio Platónico (México, 1986), punto de partida de los que ulteriormente hemos venido celebrando. Muestra, igualmente, de su tenacidad y visión de futuro fue la fundación de la revista Méthexis, de la cual ha sido Director hasta su muerte.

Sirvan esta dedicatoria y este recuerdo como cumplimiento —sobrio y sin retórica— de la invitación platónica a “encomiar a los hombres cabales”. Conrado Eggers lo fue.
Rafael Ferber

WHY DID PLATO MAINTAIN THE "THEORY OF IDEAS" IN THE TIMAEUS?

The question can be understood in two different ways, either as the question concerning the psychological causes respectively the motives or the reasons which caused Plato to maintain the "theory of Ideas" in the Timaeus. Here it is asked in the second sense. In the following I shall (I) analyze the central argument for the Ideas in the Timaeus (51d3-51e6) and (II) I would like to answer the question why Plato in the Timaeus defended again the Ideas in spite of the objections in the Parmenides.

I

The Ideas are presupposed in the Timaeus (27d5-28a4). To be sure, also the Timaeus does not give an exhaustive proof for the Ideas. On the one hand such a proof is not to be expected in a work which probably like the Republic was also destined for wider circles. On the other hand a long examination should not be lengthened still further (cf. Ti. 51c7-d1). The Timaeus therefore restricted itself explicitly merely to a little digression¹. It contains an argument which is easily intelligible and yet reproduces a basic presupposition of Platonic philosophy. The protagonist asks himself the question whether it is fruitless when we say that there is on each occasion (ἐκάστοτε) a conceivable Eidos of each thing, but this is nothing else than a logos or a manner of speaking (τὸ δ' ὁδὲν ἄρ' ἢν πάλην λόγος; 51c4-5). According to this, these Ideas would be merely linguistic utterances and Plato seems here to anticipate avant la lettre this variant of Nominalism according to which the Universals are names or more precisely "voce significativae". Here he proposes from the mouth of Timaeus the following argument for the Ideas, which appears to him to be the «most suitable one» (ἐγκαλομωστον), «if we could see our way to draw a distinction of great importance in few words» (51d1-2):

«[S1] For if reason and true belief are two different kinds, then these things

¹ Cf. concerning the meaning of "digression" in Plato the beautiful article of Brumbaugh, 1988, 84.
—Forms that we cannot perceive but only think of— certainly exist in themselves;

[S2] but if, as some hold, true belief in no way differs from reason, then all the things we perceive through the bodily senses must be taken as the most certain reality.

[S3] Now we must affirm that they are two different things, for they are distinct in origin and unlike in nature.

[S4] One of them arises in us through instruction, the other through persuasion;

[S5] the one can always give a true account of itself, the other can give none;

[S6] the one cannot be shaken by persuasion, whereas the other can be won over;

[S7] and true belief, we must allow, is shared by all mankind, reason only by the gods and a small number of men.

[S8] This being so, we must agree that there is, first, the unchanging Form, ungenerated and indestructible, which neither receives anything else into itself from elsewhere nor itself enters into anything else anywhere, invisible and otherwise imperceptible; that, in fact, which thinking has for its object.

[S9] Second is that which bears the same name and is like that Form; is sensible; is brought into existence; is perpetually in motion, coming to be in a certain place and again vanishing out of it; and is to be apprehended by belief involving perception». (Ti. 51 d3-52a7. Cornford's trans. with minor changes by R.F.)

The argument has the logical structure of a modus ponendo ponens: S1 is a conditional sentence: if p, then q. S2 contains the negation to it: if not p, then not q. S3 asserts p with two arguments. One of them is genetical and one of them structural. The structural one is divided again into three sub-groups. The genetical argument can be found in S4: Reason arises in us through instruction, true belief through persuasion. S5, S6 and S7 reproduce the structural argument with three arguments for p: Reason is linked to a true account, is not to be shaken by persuasion and in it gods as well as only a small number of men are sharing. True belief on the other hand is without a true account, can be won over by persuasion and is shared by all mankind. The proposition p can consequently pass for proven. S8 draws from this the consequence q, according to which there exists the unchanging Form, ungenerated and indestructible, etc. S9 offers a corollary which in analogy to S8 characterizes more in details the essence of the phenomena.

Let us now enter somewhat more in details into the content: S1 starts from the fundamental difference between true belief and reason, which is known to the readers of Plato since the Meno (cf. Men. 97c3-98a8). According to this, true belief, as opposed to reason, is unstable, whereas reason, as the "chain" (δεσμός) (cf. Men. 98a8) of belief stabilizes the latter.

Of course also true opinion can hit the right, but cannot give an explanation i.e. an account of the reason (αἰτίας λογισμός) (Men. 98a3-4). True opinion arises through causes, such as the questions of a skillful teacher, e.g. the questions of Socrates to the slave Meno; but it does not yet have at its disposal the reasons which make this belief resistant against other causes. Therefore true op-
nion is merely right in an accidental way. As opposed to Episteme true belief is fallible (cf. R. 477e6-7). Reason corresponds here to the third definition of knowledge of the Theaetetus, according to which Episteme consists of true opinion combined with Logos (cf. Th. 201c9-d1). For also in the third and most satisfying interpretation according to which the Logos shows forth the difference of something, the Logos presupposes again the knowledge of the difference (cf. Th. 209d8-e5). But we nevertheless may accept this concluding word of the Theaetetus as an explanation or a true opinion of reason, even if therewith its essence is not yet seized.

In S2 Plato admits the other possibility, that true belief and reason do not differ from one another in any way. Then everything we perceive through the bodily senses must be taken as the most certain reality. It is not quite clear to whom this utterance refers. They are probably the representatives of a merely corporeal Being (cf. Sph. 246a7-b3), thus, as we would say today, Materialists or Physicalists.

S3 fixes reason and true belief as different, since they have a different origin and also a different structure. According to S4, one of them arises in us through instruction, the other through persuasion. We may also say that one arises through reasons respectively arguments, the other through causes, i.e. through psychological influencing. According to S5 Noûs is always linked to "true Logos", i.e. here to "valid argumentation", true opinion on the contrary does not argue. Thus Noûs is characterized by "true Logos" (cf. Rep. 534b3-6). Timaeus or Plato thus does not make the Aristotelian distinction between an Episteme which is μετὰ λόγου or discursive (cf. EN. Z6, 1140b31-1141a8, esp. 1140b33) and an intuitive Noûs (An. post. B19.100b5-17). The Platonic Noûs too is still μετὰ λόγου. Therefore also in the Seventh Letter the nature of the Noûs can be defective (φασιλως) (cf. 343e1) like the other means of knowledge, since it too is still embedded into the «weakness of the Logoi» (Ep. VII. 343a1). According to S6 true belief is shared by all mankind, reason, i.e. here the ability of valid argumentation, only by the gods and a small number of men. Herewith probably the philosophers are meant, who are in a position to remember the Ideas (Phdr. 249c4-d3).

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2 This has been pertinently brought out by Taylor, 1928, 342: «Timaeus gives it merely as a true statement about Noûs, not a definition. He does not attempt to define νοῦς at all».

3 Cf. Taylor, 1928, 339-340: «Antisthenes has been fixed on, but on wholly insufficient grounds. In an age of scepticism about science, like the middle of the fifth century, the theory is natural enough».

4 Cf. Taylor, 1928, 341: «This proves that Plato, as we said, is making no distinction of the Aristotelian kind between νοῦς and ἐπιστήμη».

5 This point has been well made by Isnardi-Parente, 1964, 279, cf. also Ferber, 1991, 42, 76.
Now the question has to be asked whether through this argument for the Ideas the five arguments against the Ideas in the Parmenides are refuted, arguments which we shortly represent here: (a) Of what are there Ideas? Also of «man, fire and water» (Prm. 130c2) or even «hair or mud or dirt or any other trivial and undignified objects»? (Prm. 130c6-7). (b) How are we to understand the participation of particulars in the Ideas? Partly or wholly? In both cases difficulties arise (cf. Prm. 131a4-c10). (c) Don’t we have to assume between particulars and Ideas a third Idea, by virtue of which only particulars and Ideas have the properties which they have? This leads to the much discussed problem of the “Third Man” between what is the sensible man and the Idea of Man (cf. Prm. 132c4-132b2). (d) If the Ideas exist separately from particulars, they seem to become imperceptible by us (cf. Prm. 133a11-134c2). (e) But in case God perceives only the transcendent Ideas, the particulars with us seem to become imperceptible for God (cf. Prm. 134c4-e6)\(^6\).

What seems decisive, though considered too little, is that these five arguments rest on a common and explicit assumption, namely that Ideas and particulars represent separate entities (cf. the χωρίς of Prm. 130b2, 3, c1, d1) — this is the explicit assumption —, and are also ontological subjects — this is the implicit one\(^7\). Now through the argument mentioned for the Ideas none of the five arguments against the Ideas is yet refuted explicitly. But although an explicit refutation of the arguments cannot be found in the Timaeus, Plato in principle accomplished more: Before the “last argument” (cf. Tim. 51d3-52a7) for the Ideas, he gives up the implicit assumption which underlies the five difficulties of the Parmenides, namely the assumption that sensible things constitute ontological subjects. For the elements like fire and water, which constitute the basis for all other particulars, are no longer a “this” (τὸ δὲ καὶ τὸ ὅτι), but a “such” (τοιοῦτον) (49d-e). They constitute no longer “substantial”, but “qualitative” entities\(^8\) and are no better than properties like ...θεμινὴ ἡ λευκόν ἡ καὶ ὑπον τῶν ἐναντίων,...(50a2-3), none of which counts as a τοῦτο. For particulars are inversely to the Aristotelian solution of the problem how particulars are related to universals not substances from which universals can be predicated as their

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\(^7\) Cf. Ferber, 1989, 23-229, where I bring out this category-mistake which underlies the “Theory of Ideas”.

\(^8\) Cf. the interpretation of Cherniss, 1977, 346-363, Brisson, 1994b, 180-197. It is true that Cherniss, 1977, 362, writes: «It is misleading to call them “qualities”, as many translators and commentators do, for they are not confined to qualities (...) and the use of τὸ τοιοῦτον in 49d-50b has nothing whatever to do with the distinction between ‘qualities’ and ‘substance’». He proposes that we translate τὸ τοιοῦτον with “character”. Cherniss is right in as far as these τοιοῦτα are no distinct qualities, but draw their identity merely from their relation to the Ideas. Nevertheless the translation of τὸ τοιοῦτον with quality is linguistically correct and expresses pertinently the contrast to the τὸ δὲ καὶ τοῦτο of the “substantial” view of particulars.
qualities (cf. *Metaph.* Z13, 1038b22-29), but themselves qualities, namely qualities of space, the Receptacle. But if particulars constitute only qualitative entities of space, they have no longer a substantial Being, but merely a relational one versus the Ideas. Since all sensibles are made of the elements we may perhaps generalize this thesis of the relational character of the elements as follows: The Platonic sensibles are not sensible things (οὐσίως αἰτιοθεμένα), which have an identity, but merely sensible phenomena, which have no identity. With the words of Timaeus: «Since, then, in this way no one of these ever makes its appearance (φανταξομένων) as the same, which of them can we steadfastly affirm to be this —whatever it may be— and not something else, without blushing for ourselves?» (49c7-d3. Cornford's trans. with some minor changes from R. F.)

In as far as the first difficulty is concerned, the *Timaeus* does not make any reservations regarding the sensibles. Since there is on each occasion (ἐκάστοτε) a conceivable Eidos of each thing (cf. *Tim.* 51c4, 51b7-c1; also *Ep. VII.* 342d3-8, esp. 6-7), there is no reason why there should not exist also Ideas of «man, fire and of water» (cf. *Prm.* 130c2) or even «hair or mud or dirt or any other trivial and undignified objects» (Prm. 130c6-7), since all sensibles arise from the elements. And ideas of the elements are explicitly affirmed.

But what is more decisive: through the qualitative view of the elements Plato can avoid the question concerning the relation of participation between these elements and the Ideas. The question how the elements partake in the Ideas — wholly or partly— arises no more, since they are «copies of the eternal things, impressions taken from them in strange manner that is hard to express (δόσ-φασμον): we will follow it up on another occasion» (*Tim.* 50c5-6). Accordingly in the late dialogues and in particular in the *Timaeus*, we find the participation between sensibles and Ideas replaced by the "copy-relation". Alone space or the receptacle is «partaking in some very puzzling way (ἀπωφοτατακ ηι) of the intelligible and very hard to apprehend» (Tim. 51a7-b1), since it is still a τι and not a τοιοντον. It is, according to a lucky expression of L. Stefanini, «the substantialised extension»11. Yet the sensible elements are no more substances, which would partake «in some very puzzling way of the intelligible», but only copies in space of the eternal with no independent being — like «fleeting images seen in a mirror»12.

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9 R. E. Allen, 1983, 180, has made this point pertinently as follows: «Sensibles are relational entities, whose whole being is such as to be in something other than themselves, space, the Receptacle, and of something other than themselves, the eternal Ideas, which are alone truly existent».

10 Cf. Fujisawa, 1974, as well as Kahn, 1995, 59: «Plato has in effect given up the concept of participation that is criticised in the *Parmenides*. On the one hand, the language of participation has been transferred in the *Sophist* to denote a relationship between Forms, not between particulars and Forms. And on the other hand, relation that connects the realm of change and sense perception to the Forms is now regularly described in terms of likeness, image, and imitation, in the *Statesman* as in the *Timaeus*».

11 Stefanini, 1949, 11, 282.

12 Cornford, 1938, 181.
But if the elements are such purely qualitative entities, then the question whether we don’t have to assume between them and the Ideas a third Idea, by virtue of which the elements have the properties which they have, disappears. For the sensible elements are not at all things, but merely relational entities, i.e. in an Aristotelian expression, “accidents” of the Ideas which the demiourge impressed upon space. Their structure thus cannot any longer be rendered by the subject-predicate structure SP or Fx, since this x is always changing. It must be rendered rather by an Fc, whereby the variable x is replaced by the constant c (c from chóra), which stands for space. For the logical presuppositions for the Third Man are not only (a) the assumption of non-identity of the Ideas and sensibles and (b) the so-called selfpredication following G. Vlastos’ influential article¹³, but also (c) the substantial view of sensibles¹⁴. Aristotle avoids the Third Man in as far as he makes of the Universals themselves again qualities of sensibles seen as substances (cf. Metaph. Z13, 1038b34-1039a3), for «It is not the separation which makes the Third Man, but the concession that what is separated is a this» (SE. 22, 179a3-4). Inversely Plato avoids the Third Man in the Timaeus in as far as for him sensibles are no longer a “This”. So Plato’s own solution of the Third Man seems to be «the mirror image of Aristotle’s»¹⁵.

All things considered herewith also the presupposition, the chórismos, which lies at the bottom of the two last difficulties of the Parmenides is avoided, in as far as the elements qua relational entities are no longer separated entities, but constitute “accidents” or “quasi-accidents” of the Ideas, which the demiourge copied from them. To be sure Plato did not introduce the notion of accident. He limits himself to the statement that the manner of this copying is «hard to express» (δύσφαραςτόν). But since he nowhere explains «this strange manner that is hard to express (δύσφαραςτόν)» we may introduce the Aristotelian notion of “accident” or rather “quasi-accidents” to express this strange manner in a more familiar way. Wheter Plato would have accepted this expression, is difficult to say. But at least, contrary to the Parmenides (cf.129e6, 130c3, 135a3) in the Timaeus «this strange manner» no longer appears aporetic, whereas the apory of the relation of participation dispaces itself to space, if only the latter is «partaking in some very puzzling way (ἀποροταικτα πη) of the intelligible ...» (Tim. 51a7-b1). Thus one of the functions of the introduction of space or the receptacle consists in avoiding the apories of the relation between sensible elements and the Ideas, in as far as sensibles now become qualities in space. To be sure, with this introduction of space as “substantialised extension”, the apories of the Parmenides are not explicite solved. Yet their decisive implicit presupposition, the substantial view of sensibles, which Aristotle then develops against Plato, is

¹³ Vlastos, 1954.
¹⁵ Allen, 1983,180. Cf. already Cherniss, 1944, 298, without reference to the Timaeus: «Plato, then, believed that since the idea is that which the particular has as an attribute, the ‘third man’ is illegitimate as an argument against the ideas because idea and particular cannot be treated as homogeneous members of a multiplicity». The thorough article of Mignucc, 1990, 143-181, does not take the Timaeus in consideration for a possible solution of the Third Man argument.
removed. And with the implicit presupposition also the explicit one: the chō-
rismós between Ideas and sensibles. Since the Ideas are transcendent beings
whose relational “accidents” are in space, they are no more separated from each
other like two different substances.

But in spite of this implicit solution of the apories in the Parmenides, the
“theory of ideas” is not, even in the Timaeus, founded with all the means at
Plato’s disposal. The expression, that Timaeus undertakes a «distinction of great
importance in a few words» hints at the fact that Plato was able to say something
quite long about this distinction, as indeed we may gather, besides the dialogues,
also from Aristotle, Metaph. A9 and Peri Ideón. But also in the Timaeus the
protagonist does not “simply asseverate” (cf. 51c7) this distinction. What he
brings is merely an hypothesis: If we distinguish between true belief and reason,
then we also must assume Ideas. To be sure, we are dealing here with an hypothe-
sis which appeared to be right to the protagonist: «My own verdict, then is this»
(Tim. 51d3). Thus, in spite of appearances (cf. Tim. 27d5-28a4), the assumption
of the Ideas in no way appears as a dogma or doxa which the protagonist would
have proclaimed ex cathedra, but as the consequent from a conditional sentence,
which represents the choice of Timaeus or Plato in a philosophical bifurcation.

We may thus answer the question of the title “Why did Plato maintain the
‘theory of Ideas’ in the Timaeus?” as follows. He defended it again, since the
latent presupposition of the apories in the Parmenides, the substantial view of
sensibles, appears to be implicitly removed through the introduction of space,
and because it appeared to him to be a better hypothesis than the one of the
Materialists. Here in this middle between the dogmatism of a proclamation
“There are Ideas” and the scepticism of a denial “There are no Ideas” it thus
seems to me that the “Theory of Ideas” of the Timaeus has to be classified as the
consequent of an antecedent and i. e. as an hypothesis.

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17 Thanks are due to Dr. Julius Tomin for some stylistic improvements. Cf. for a
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