

THE CONCEPT OF *ΥΛΗ* (MATTER) IN PLATO'S *TIMAEUS*

There is a particular reason for the concept of *matter* (ὑλή) in Plato's *Timaeus* to be pondered upon: this reason has not so much to do with the fact that Plato was the founder of idealism; that is, what is of the main interest is not to see how the patriarch of *idealism* treats the most *material* of all subjects — namely, matter itself. What is more important is that a meticulous research on the concept of *matter* provides a pivotal point for assessing certain long-standing and tantalizing questions. These questions relate not only with Plato's *Timaeus*, but also with his thought in general.

One of the main questions we shall deal with in this paper is how ὑλή is perceived by a philosopher with the intellectual presuppositions of Plato and the particular tenets held by him; and, yes, how the notion of ὑλή is perceived in a work which was written after the *Sophist*, also after the *State*, and probably after the *Politicus*. It was written, that is, after Plato had expounded almost all the fundamental doctrines which determine his entire philosophy. It has to be pointed out right from the start that, as far as the concept of ὑλή is concerned, in *Timaeus* there are statements grossly contradicting each other, repetitions, inconsistencies, tergiversations. They are significant discrepancies indeed; I call them «significant» because they bear upon important features of Plato's overall way of thinking and forming of his own philosophy, as will be discussed presently.

One reason allowing Plato to commit these inconsistencies is that his views of *matter* are expounded in a purely dogmatic manner. *What* matter proper is, is expressed in an apocalyptic way, in a way implying that Plato offers a sort of revelation. This would be understandable, given the material nature of the subject and the difficulty to be expounded through the terminology and view of an idealistic philosophy. The sort of dialectics known from other dialogues is almost absent from here. Certainly it is not accidental that *Timaeus* is not really a dialogue, but it is a monologue of the person called Timaeus. In the final analysis, this is an exposition of an aristotelian character — yet without the scientific spirit of Aristotle. There are not even these questions/replies which, in other Platonic works, leave the reader with the impression that the interlocutors reach their philosophical conclusions through the way of a logically inevitable process.

The exposition of the Platonic (or supposed to be Platonic) views of matter demonstrates a characteristic which applies to the entire *Timaeus* and is a

fundamental feature of this work: in a work supposed to expound a scientific question, the narration is couched by means of mythological notions. What Plato essays to do is to expound the entire scientific knowledge about cosmogony that had reached him. What he takes for granted though is the assumption that certain notions can be approached by human nature only vaguely and imprecisely. This is why the narration assumes this particular character. Still, whether what Plato regards as *mythological* can be allowed to be *contradictionary* as well, is something that remains to be examined, and so will be later on.

In order to see how Plato comprehends of *matter*, it is necessary to see how matter is understood to participate in the structure of the universe; how this was created (if created at all); and what was there (if anything) before cosmogony (if any notion of *before* could make any sense at all). The Platonic view of matter in *Timaeus* presupposes a fundamental distinction which is characteristic of his ontology: on the one hand, there is «that which always exists and is not an outcome of genesis» (τὸ ὄν αἰεί, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον)¹, and on the other, that which «is always *becoming* and yet it never *is being*» (τὸ γιγνόμενον μὲν αἰεί, ὄν δὲ οὐδέποτε)². Besides, as far as *genesis* is concerned, this always takes place of *necessity* (ἐξ ἀνάγκης)³. This is a deterministic view stated at many points of *Timaeus*⁴, as well as in other works⁵.

The question which is invited then is how cosmogony is perceived in respect of the foregoing distinction. Plato's answer is that the world was made and its present form started to exist from a certain beginning on. There is however a crucial remark that has to be made at this point; a remark that is of utmost importance and may escape attention when the unclear text of this philosophical work is studied: when Plato refers to the universe, he usually uses the term «heaven» (οὐρανός)⁶; he seldom uses the term *cosmos*. Although the genesis of the «heaven» (that is of the *orderly* universe) is closely related to *matter* (ὑλῇ) itself, this «heaven» has to be distinguished from *matter proper*. How can this distinction be made (if really Plato succeeds in making this), and how could it make some sense, will be examined in a few moments. What is important is that this «heaven» was made as an image of the eternal and immutable world. With regard to our topic, we should bear in mind the notion implied: what was made is of a character which is *dependent* as *correlate* (as an «image») to an eternal and timeless world.

1. *Timaeus*, 27 d.

2. *Ibid.*, 28 a (my italics).

3. *Ibid.*, 28 a.

4. *Ibid.*, 29 d, 38 d, 44 c, 46 e, 68 e, 69 a, 87c.

5. *Phaedo*, 98 c, 99 b; *Philebus*, 27 b; *Laws*, 10, 891 e.

6. *Timaeus*, 28 c.

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The crucial question then comes up: what was the rôle of *ύλη* in the creation of the «heaven»? As a matter of fact, this is the question which tantalizes the students of Plato since his death to our day. Let us then try to see how this question comes up out of the text of *Timaeus*: There is serious, and I think well substantiated, objection to the existence of the notion of creation *ex nihilo* in *Timaeus*: in 29 e the *cause* for god to wish the universe to be «made» is clearly stated: the cause was that god wished everything to *become* as similar to himself as possible. This is the starting point for the making of the cosmos. How did this making come to pass? God «took over» all the pre-existing formless matter and brought about order out of a disorderly state of chaos⁷.

This (as well as that part of the work which precedes this point) clearly denotes that there was *a sort of* matter already before the creative act (which is in fact adumbrated as a decorative act) of god. We shall later examine what kind of matter this was. What is of importance at this point is that Plato found *something* which was «visible by its nature» (φύσει ὁρατόν). Thus the divine creative act is represented not as a creation *ex nihilo*, but as an arrangement, an ordering of a pre-existing stuff moving in a chaotic disorderly motion. This stuff was *visible* — which is clearly stated. But was this the matter which we are seeing now? This is a crucial question, to which the answer is not so simple. In order to answer this, it is necessary to take into account another axiom which is set forth at this point of *Timaeus*: what comes into being must of necessity be corporeal, and hence visible and tangible⁸. Does this mean that «the stuff» which existed before the cosmos was not «corporeal» and visible and tangible?

Whatever that was (we shall see later what it was) one thing is for sure: matter, the well-known visible matter which makes up the body of the universe, was made in the beginning. For it was then that the Demiurge mixed the four elements with each other in order to create the commonly-known universe. And yet, the four elements (fire, earth, air, water) were not made out of nothing. The Demiurge simply mixed them in the appropriate manner (ἀπεργασάμενος ... ξυνέδησε καὶ ξυνεστήσατο οὐρανὸν ὁρατὸν καὶ ἄπτὸν)⁹ for the purpose of producing matter. Hence, the well-known *matter* appears as something new, as a novelty in the realm of being. But newness does not apply to the notion of *materiality* as well — a notion which did exist before the appearance of matter.

7. *Ibid.*, 30 a: Οὕτω δὴ πᾶν ὅσον ἦν ὁρατὸν παραλαβὼν οὐχ ἡσυχίαν ἄγον, ἀλλὰ κινούμενον πλημμελῶς καὶ ἀτάκτως εἰς τάξιν αὐτὸ ἤγαγεν ἐκ τῆς ἀταξίας...

8. *Ibid.*, 31 b: Σωματοειδὲς δὲ δὴ καὶ ὁρατὸν ἄπτὸν τε δεῖ τὸ γενόμενον εἶναι.

9. *Ibid.*, 32 b.



The difference is very significant and, to Plato, the elements which make up this difference are absolutely clear: the pre-existing stuff was something inanimate, whereas the matter, which was formed in the «beginning» of the cosmos, is the «body» of an animate world, of a «perfect animal»¹⁰. It is also quite characteristic that the soul (which was bestowed by god to the cosmos) is regarded as «older» to the world, but not older to the pre-existing disorderly stuff¹¹.

Of what kind or nature this «stuff» is, is one of the big questions surrounding *Timaeus*. This confusion is largely due to the rather grossly conflicting and irreconcilable statements within this work. Thus, in 36 e, it is stated that whatever is «corporeal» (σωματοειδές) was made *after* the harmony, which emerged as the outcome of the divine creative act. This, however, means that the *materiality* makes its appearance only at the moment of creation of the cosmos. But such a proposition contradicts what is stated earlier in the same work. Furthermore, that the «body of the world *became* visible» (τὸ μὲν δὴ σῶμα ὁρατὸν οὐρανοῦ γέγονεν)¹², is a statement leading to two inferences: firstly, the present body of the world did not exist beginninglessly; secondly, whatever existed before the cosmos was invisible. These points where Plato contradicts himself are not the only ones. For instance, whereas in 36 e he states that the cosmos had a «beginning» but will have no end, in 38 c he clearly states that the cosmos will come to an end. However, I am not going to pick up all the points where Plato contradicts himself in this work. I am only pointing out that there are not few irreconcilable statements there.

Plato himself seems to feel that the views he expounds must suffer from discrepancies — but he obviously seems to have never pointed them out. For, had he realized them, he could have taken care to eliminate them, or at least to offer a resolution. I think, it is the suspicion of something going wrong that makes him later (in 47 c ff) to essay to provide a further exposition of *what* is exactly the condition of this pre-existent stuff, which was put in order by god. But it is obvious that, if he is to rely on his previous assessments, he cannot release himself from the set of these inconsistent and irreconcilable statements. It is worth following Plato's words at this point verbatim: «we then have to return back and to employ another principle for those phenomena a principle more appropriate to them; and, as we did for the previous analyses, so now we have to start all over again. We have to examine the nature of fire and water and air and earth before the creation of the heaven, as well as the properties existing in that stage. For no one has hitherto explained their coming to being; but we keep speaking as if we were talking to people who know

10. *Ibid.*, 32 d-33 a.

11. *Ibid.*, 34 b-c.

12. *Ibid.*, 27 a.

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what fire is, as well what is each of the other elements, saying that they are principles, assuming that they are elements of the universe, whereas it is not appropriate to any man, who has even a little of prudence, to liken them to syllables. Now, then, what we think about this, goes as follows: we are now going to talk not about the principle, or principles, of all things (or, however anyone wishes to call them); not because of any other reason, but only because it is difficult for me to expound my opinion following the present method of exposition. So do not you think that it is my duty to say this opinion, because even I myself could not be able to convince myself that, had I undertaken such a great task, I could be able to carry it out properly. But, complying with what I said in the beginning (that is, paying proper attention to the power of what is plausible) I will essay to say things which are not less plausible, but more plausible, in respect of what has been said by others, either concerning things in particular, or all of them, as an entity. Again then, having invoked god to help us as saviour, and keep us away from any irrational or inconsistent narration, and implant to us plausible opinions, let us start our investigation again»¹³.

What is Plato doing then? He simply starts treating the issue right from the start, changing his views and presuppositions, in order to overcome his *cul-de-sac*. In doing so, he postulates not any more two (as he did at the outset), but three kinds of being: firstly, that *which* comes into being; secondly, that *within* which something comes into being; thirdly, that *in imitation* of which that which comes into being is made. Plato does not explicate his problem, but this can really be summed up in the following questions: *what* is exactly the meaning and nature of *matter* before the making of the cosmos? In order to answer this, he strives to find recourse to an intuitive approach to a notion of *all-inclusiveness*, thus leading himself to address the notion of space. He does this, in order to escape the *multiplicity* stemming from the postulation of four elements, since each of them is held to be able to be transformed into the other. He develops his assertion as follows:

Let us suppose that somebody forms all kinds of geometrical figures in gold, and ceaselessly keeps transforming each one of them into all the others. If one of these figures were shown to someone, the most safe answer to the question «what is this?» could be: «this is gold». For what was made of gold cannot safely be called «being» (ὄν), since this is changed all the time. This could be called «such» (τὸ τοιοῦτον). The same can be said of *nature*, which accepts all kinds of bodies within itself. We must always call nature by the same name; for it never gives up its fundamental property, which is to accept all things within itself, and yet never, in no way and in no case, does in itself (that is, nature) assume any form similar to that of the things that emerge and exist within it. For any particular thing, nature stands as a

13. *Ibid.*, 48 b-e.

moving mould, which changes according to what enters it, but nature proper remains always something *different* from these figures. This is the way in which Plato perceives of this *all-inclusive* notion, which he contradistinguishes from things themselves contained in it. As he puts it, that within which moulding takes place is best prepared only if it is formless, that is, in itself deprived of any form. Thus Plato goes ahead with a purely idealistic abstraction and strives to correlate what is *material* with what is *invisible*. The means he employs towards this goal is quite obvious: he postulates a *formless* all-inclusive element, which is deprived of all qualities, and which is formed only by what it contains. This is why, he argues, we should call the primeval stage is some invisible and formless kind of being, which receives everything in it and which participates to the intelligible world in a way which is difficult to be explained¹⁴.

To Plato, this is a third kind of being: it is a kind of space, which is eternally existing, it is not susceptible of corruption and provides place to everything that comes into being. But this space itself cannot be comprehended, unless through a reasoning which is not supported by sensible experience, and thus, by an argument which is very difficult to be believed¹⁵. Hence, *before* creation there are three fundamental forms existing: the absolute being, space proper, and that which comes into being (ὄν τε καὶ χώραν καὶ γένεσιν ... τρία τριχῇ καὶ πρὶν οὐρανὸν γενέσθαι)¹⁶.

However, despite the employment of space as an independent element existing before creation, Plato cannot provide an answer to this question: what constituted *genesis* before «the heaven» came into being? that is, what constituted *materiality* before the creation of *matter*? To this questions Plato did not provide any answer until the end. He merely stated that, in the reality before creation, all these elements (fire, et.c.) existed in a condition without reason and measure: they existed in a condition from which god is absent¹⁷.

Certainly though this does not constitute an answer. It is then the case that Plato has not been able to solve the problem of *matter* in *Timaeus*. In view of this, it is not strange that scholars and commentators of Plato such as A. E. Taylor¹⁸ and F. M. Cornford¹⁹ passed by the problem of the conception of matter in *Timaeus*, and left this virtually unexamined. For indeed it is Plato himself that left his problem moot, obviously because he himself had not formed a clear view of it. He contended himself with self-contradictions, which he essayed to protect from philosophical and

14. *Ibid.*, 51 a.

15. *Ibid.*, 52 b.

16. *Ibid.*, 52 d.

17. *Ibid.*, 53 c.

18. A. E. TAYLOR, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, Oxford, 1928.

19. F. M. CORNFORD, *Plato's Cosmology*, London, 1937.

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logical test, covering them behind statements of pseudo-mysticism. Thus, at the end of *Timaeus*, he comes back in order to aver that, whatever existed before creation did not participate, unless by chance, either in analogy or measure; neither anything was worthy of receiving any of the names given to them by us now, such as fire, water etc²⁰. That is we refer to «fire» (as Plato recurrently does in *Timaeus*), but this fire was not really fire.

To essay to idealize matter, postulating a notion of matter without qualities, is something which could be understandable for an idealist such as Plato. However, he moved towards this direction with very uncertain steps and finally he did not provide an intergraded answer to this question. He stopped at appealing to mysticism and virtually confessing his inability to comprehend and really articulate the problem. So Plato does say what the state of things before creation *was not*, but he does not say what this *was*. He stops at asserting that there was something, yet something that cannot be named or even described. Certainly that «something» *was not the matter* which constitutes the «body» of the universe after the making of the cosmos.

My conclusion is that the concept of *matter* in *Timaeus* is quite significant, at least in one respect: it demonstrates that some, by no means unimportant, tenets of Plato are of a dependent and unelaborated character. The way in which this concept is expounded denotes that Plato himself essays to give an account of an issue that he probably heard from somewhere, but which he had not really assimilated. At least in the text, there is no serious attempt to clarify the obscurities and self-contradictions surrounding the exposition. Even the concept of space, which seems to be after all introduced in order to solve the quandary, remains finally unclear and enigmatic. There is no really any theory about the nature of space proper; space is referred to only *en passant*, when he refers to the nature of the elements and creatures of the «necessity»²¹. One might suspect that this vagueness is left as it stands consciously, in order to avoid critical questions about the entire idealistic philosophy. For it should not be disregarded that in the work which followed *Timaeus*, namely the *Laws*, some vital and crucial aspects of Platonic idealism seem to be reconsidered. My assertion then is that in *Timaeus* certain views taken from other cultures are present in an incomplete and unassimilated form. It is not difficult, for instance, to point out biblical influence²²; and certainly we cannot know

20. *Ibid.*, 69 b-c.

21. *Ibid.*, 46 e: Δεῖ καὶ τὰ δι' ἀνάγκης γινόμενα τῷ λόγῳ παραθέσθαι. The notion of *necessity* is vigorously present in this work. In fact, the world is held to be the product of a combination of *necessity* and *rationality*.

22. *Ibid.*, 34 b: Διὰ πάντα δὴ ταῦτα εὐδαίμονα θεὸν αὐτὸν ἐγεννήσατο. Cf. *Genesis*, 1, 8; 1, 10; 1, 13; 1, 31, etc.: «and God saw that it was good». Cf. also *Timaeus*, 34 b: ἄγαλμα γεννήσας ὁ πατήρ, ἡγάσθη τε καὶ εὐφρανθεὶς ἔτι δὴ μᾶλλον ὁμοιον πρὸς τὸ παράδειγμα ἐπενόησεν ἀπεργάσασθαι, in relation to

what was Plato's harvest from his discussions with the priests in Egypt during his visit there. Some of my recent research has shown that old accounts, according to which Plato availed himself extensively of the old wisdom of other cultures, is not without sound argument²³.

It is true of course that Plato sometimes seems not to pay too much attention to, or to put too much importance on, the consistency of his writings; to him these writings are but a game, a «joyfull game» (παγκάλην παιδιάν)²⁴. But what could Plato be today without these writings? Thus, Plato refers to the genesis of the universe without providing a consistent account either about matter, or space. He treats a par excellence *material* issue in an utterly *idealized* way. This is what rendered the exposition problematic; and this is why he finally fails to illuminate the point he intended to expound in the first place. The transition from the world of ideas to the world of matter is by no means easy to Plato. In essaying to provide an account of creation, his concept of space would be the connecting notion between these two worlds. But this is extremely difficult to Plato, too. For the problem of space proper is inherently related to the problem of Ideas or Forms. The latter is what Plato made his last attempt to solve in his next dialogue, the *Laws*. But hardly could someone sustain that this attempt was finally successful.

It was not until quite later, that is, at the time of Plotinus, that Platonic thought addressed itself to the question of matter *ad hoc* and provided a full account of it²⁵. Plotinus obviously realized that Plato's initial treatment, as it was standing, could lead nowhere. So he made the distinction between intelligible and sensible matter. *Intelligible* matter is held to be indefinite and composite, but unchangeable. This notion was introduced because the forms of the intelligible world are in need of a substratum and because the matter of the sensible world needs an archetype in the intelligible world. *Sensible* matter is necessary, but this should not be identified either with particular elements or with atoms or with the infinite or with any mixture. Matter proper has neither limits nor shape. This matter is incorporeal, with no quantity and no quality at all. It receives all kinds of forms in it and is necessary for the structure of bodies to make sense. In the next treatise of the *Enneads*, namely the one entitled «On Matter»²⁶, Plotinus sustains that matter proper is non-being (μὴ ὄν), so this does not belong either to the category of the sensible things or to that of

Genesis, 1, 26: «Let us make man in our image after our likeness». Also, cf. the reference to «the race of the prophets», in *Timaeus*, 72 a, when the «prophets» was something unknown and alien to the hellenic world.

23. P. TZAMALIKOS, *The Concept of Time in Origen*, Bern, Peter Lang, 1991, Ch. 5.

24. *Phaedo*, 276 e.

25. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, II, 4: «On Matter» («Περὶ ὕλης»).

26. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, II, 4: «Περὶ τοῦ δυνάμει καὶ ἐνεργείᾳ».

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the intelligible ones; matter proper is but a *potentiality*, subject to the power of form (μορφή); this is the potentiality serving to the appearance of the Forms in the sensible world. This potentiality becomes reality only through the domination of the Form over matter. This notion of potentiality (that is, uncomplete realization of an inherent essential property) appears only in the sensible world; for in the intelligible world nothing exists in potentiality: in that world everything exists in the state of full reality, everything there is essence. This Neoplatonic account is absolutely absent from *Timaeus*. The question of matter proper had to wait some five centuries in order to receive a valid and consistent exposition, a really full account within the scope defined by the premises of this philosophy.

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Η ΕΝΝΟΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΥΛΗΣ ΣΤΟΝ *ΤΙΜΑΙΟ* ΤΟΥ ΠΛΑΤΩΝΟΣ

Π ε ρ ί λ η ψ η

Ἐάν ὑπάρχει ἓνας ἰδιαίτερος λόγος γιὰ νὰ διερευνηθεῖ ἡ περὶ ὕλης ἀντίληψη στὸν *Τίμαιο* τοῦ Πλάτωνος, αὐτὸς ὁ λόγος δὲν ἔγκειται τόσο στὸ γεγονὸς ὅτι ὁ Πλάτων ἦταν ὁ κατ' ἐξοχὴν ἰδρυτὴς τοῦ ἰδεαλισμοῦ. Ὅπως ἐκ τῶν ὑστέρων ἀποδεικνύει ἡ σχετικὴ ἔρευνα, ἡ διερεύνηση τοῦ ἀνωτέρου θέματος ἀποτελεῖ μίᾳ ἀπὸ τὶς λυδίες λίθους γιὰ νὰ ἀπαντηθοῦν μερικὰ ἐρωτήματα, ἀφορῶντα καὶ στὸν *Τίμαιο* εἰδικότερα, ἀλλὰ καὶ στὴν σκέψη τοῦ Πλάτωνος γενικότερα.

Τὰ κυριότερα ἀπὸ τὰ ζητήματα ποὺ μᾶς ἀπασχολοῦν εἶναι τὸ πῶς ἀντιλαμβάνεται τὴν ὕλη ἓνας φιλόσοφος μὲ τὶς προϋποθέσεις καὶ τὶς πεποιθήσεις τοῦ Πλάτωνος, καὶ μάλιστα σὲ ἓνα ἔργο ποὺ ἐγράφη μετὰ ἀπὸ τὸν *Σοφιστὴ*, μετὰ ἀπὸ τὴν *Πολιτεία* καί, πιθανότατα, μετὰ ἀπὸ τὸν *Πολιτικό*. Ἐγράφη, δηλαδή, ἀφοῦ ὁ Πλάτων εἶχε ἤδη ἐκθέσει σχεδὸν τὸ σύνολο τῶν ἀπόψεων ποὺ διακαθορίζουν τὴν ὅλη φιλοσοφία του.

Ἡ πλατωνικὴ περὶ ὕλης ἀντίληψη στὸν *Τίμαιο* προϋποθέτει μίᾳ θεμελιώδη διάκριση ἀναφερόμενη στὴν ὄντολογία του: Ὑπάρχει ἐκεῖνο τὸ ὁποῖον πάντοτε ὑπάρχει καὶ δὲν ἔχει γένεση -τὸ ὄν αἰεί, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον (27 d) καὶ ἐκεῖνο τὸ ὁποῖον πάντοτε γεννᾶται καὶ ποτὲ δὲν ὑπάρχει -τὸ γινόμενον μὲν αἰεί, ὄν δὲ οὐδέποτε (28 a). Ἐξ ἄλλου, σὲ ὅ,τι ἀφορᾷ τὴν γένεση, αὕτὴ πάντοτε λαμβάνει χώραν ἐξ ἀνάγκης (28 a), μιᾷ ἀποψῇ (ἀρχὴ τῆς αἰτιότητος) ποὺ ὁ Πλάτων ἐπαναλαμβάνει σὲ διάφορα σημεῖα τοῦ *Τιμαίου* (29 d, 38 d, 44 c, 46 e, 68 e, 69 a, 87 c), ἀλλὰ καὶ σὲ ἄλλα ἔργα του (*Φαίδων* 98 c, 99 b· *Φίληβος* 27 b· *Νόμοι* 10,891 c).



Ἡ *ex nihilo* δημιουργία εἶναι μία σύλληψη γιὰ τὴν ὁποία ὑπάρχει σοβαρὴ καὶ βάσιμη ἀμφισβήτηση περὶ τοῦ ἐὰν ὑπάρχει στὸν *Τίμαιο*. Καὶ ὄχι ἄδικα: Στὸ 29 ε ἀναφέρεται σαφῶς ὅτι ἡ αἰτία, γιὰ τὴν ὁποίαν ὁ θεὸς ἠθέλησε νὰ «γεννηθεῖ» τὸ σύμπαν ἦταν ὅτι ὁ ἴδιος ἠθέλε νὰ γίνουν ὅλα ὅσο τὸ δυνατόν πιὸ ὅμοια μὲ τὸν ἑαυτό του. Αὕτὴ εἶναι ἡ «ἀρχὴ» τῆς γενέσεως τοῦ κόσμου. Καὶ πῶς αὕτὴ πραγματοποιήθηκε; Ὁ θεὸς «παρέλαβε» ὅλη τὴν ὁρατὴ μάζα καὶ τὴν ἔφερε σὲ τάξη ἀπὸ τὴν ἀταξία.

Ἡ ὕλη, ἡ γνωστὴ ὁρατὴ ὕλη, ἡ ὁποία συνέθεσε τὸ σῶμα τοῦ σύμπαντος, ἐδημιουργήθη κατὰ τὴν «ἀρχήν». Διότι ἦταν τότε πού ὁ δημιουργὸς ἀνέμιξε τὰ τέσσερα στοιχεῖα, ὥστε νὰ δημιουργηθεῖ ἡ ὕλη τὴν ὁποίαν γνωρίζουμε. Καὶ πάλι, ὅμως τὰ τέσσερα στοιχεῖα (πῦρ, γῆ, ἀέρας, ὕδωρ) δὲν ἐδημιουργήθησαν ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος. Ὁ δημιουργὸς ἀπλῶς τὰ συνέθεσε καταλλήλως (ἀπεργασάμενος ... *ξυνέδησε καὶ ξυνεστήσατο οὐρανὸν ὁρατὸν καὶ ἀπτὸν* (32 b)).

Ἔτσι, ἡ γνωστὴ ὁρατὴ ὕλη ἐμφανίζεται ὡς κάτι νέο — ὄχι ὅμως καὶ ἡ ὑλικότητα. Τὸ τί ἀκριβῶς συνιστᾷ αὐτὸ τὸ «ύλικό» ἀποτελεῖ ἓνα ἀπὸ τὰ μεγάλα ἐρωτηματικὰ πού σχετίζονται μὲ τὸν *Τίμαιο*. Σὲ τοῦτο συντελοῦν οἱ μᾶλλον χονδροειδεῖς ἀντιφάσεις τοῦ ἰδίου τοῦ Πλάτωνα μέσα στὸ ἔργο αὐτό. Ἔτσι, στὸ 36 ε, ἀναφέρει ὅτι κάθε τι τὸ ὁποῖον εἶναι «σωματοειδές» ἐδημιουργήθη μετὰ τὴν ἀρμονίαν ἡ ὁποία ἀπετέλεσε καὶ τὸ ἀντικείμενο τῆς θεϊκῆς δημιουργικῆς πράξης. Τοῦτο, ὅμως, σημαίνει ὅτι ἡ ὑλικότητα ἐμφανίζεται μόνο μὲ τὴν δημιουργία τοῦ κόσμου — πρόταση ἡ ὁποία κατάφωρα ἀντιφάσκει σὲ ὅσα προηγουμένως ἀναφέρονται μέσα στὸ ἴδιο ἔργο.

Δὲν τὸ λέει ὁ Πλάτων, ἀλλὰ τὸ πρόβλημά του εἶναι πραγματικὰ τοῦτο: *Τί ἀκριβῶς συνιστᾷ τὴν «ὕλη» τὴν πρὸ τῆς δημιουργίας;* Καί, πρὸς τοῦτο, καταφεύγει σὲ μία ἔννοια «περιέχοντος», γιὰ νὰ ξεφύγει ἀπὸ τὴν *πολλαπλότητα* πού συνιστᾷ ἡ παραδοχὴ ἔστω καὶ τεσσάρων μόνο στοιχείων, ἀφοῦ αὐτὰ μετασχηματίζονται ἀπὸ τὸ ἓνα στὸ ἄλλο. Ἔτσι ὁ Πλάτων προχωρεῖ σὲ μία καθαρὰ ἰδεαλιστικὴ ἀφαίρεση καὶ προσπαθεῖ νὰ συνδυάσει τὸ ὑλικὸ μὲ τὸ ἀόρατο. Ὁ τρόπος πού ἐπιλέγει εἶναι φανερός. Δημιουργεῖ ἓνα *ἄποιον* περιέχον, τὸ ὁποῖο κάθε φορὰ μορφοποιεῖται συγκεκριμένα μόνο ἀπὸ ὃ,τι περιέχει. Γι' αὐτό, λέγει, ἅς μὴν ὀνομάζουμε τὴν ἀρχικὴ κατάσταση οὔτε γῆ, οὔτε ἀέρα, οὔτε πῦρ, οὔτε ὕδωρ, οὔτε τίποτε ἀπὸ ἐκεῖνα πού γεννῶνται. Τὸ συμπέρασμά του εἶναι ὅτι αὐτὸ τὸ ὁποῖον ὑπῆρχε ἦταν κάποιο εἶδος ἀόρατο καὶ ἄμορφο, τὸ ὁποῖον τὰ δέχεται ὅλα καὶ τὸ ὁποῖον μετέχει τοῦ νοητοῦ κατὰ τρόπον *δυσεξήγητον* καὶ τρόπον πού εἶναι πολὺ δύσκολο νὰ γίνεῖ ἀντιληπτὸς (51 a).

Αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος εἶναι, κατὰ τὸν Πλάτωνα, ἓνα τρίτο εἶδος ὑπάρξεως: Εἶναι ἓνα εἶδος χώρου, ὁ ὁποῖος ὑπάρχει πάντοτε, δὲν ἐπιδέχεται φθορὰν καὶ παρέχει τόπον σὲ ὅλα ὅσα γεννῶνται. Ὁ ἴδιος ὅμως δὲν εἶναι ἀντιληπτὸς, παρὰ μέσω ἐνὸς εἶδους νόθου συλλογισμοῦ, ἐνὸς συλλογισμοῦ τὸν ὁποῖον δὲν

συννοδεύει καθόλου ή αίσθηση και ό όποιος είναι δύσκολα πιστευτός (52 b). Έτσι, πριν από την δημιουργία υπάρχουν τρία είδη: Τό απόλυτο όν, ό χώρος και εκείνο τό όποϊον γεννᾶται (όν τε καί χώραν καί γένεσιν ... τρία τριχῇ καί πριν οὐρανόν γενέσθαι 52 d). Έν τούτοις, παρᾶ την ἀναγνώριση τοῦ χώρου ὡς ἀνεξαρτήτου στοιχείου προϋπάρχοντος τῆς δημιουργίας, ό Πλάτων δέν μπορεῖ νά ἀπαντήσῃ στό κεφαλαιῶδες ἐρώτημα. Τί συνιστᾶ την γένεσιν ... πριν οὐρανόν γενέσθαι; Μὲ ἄλλα λόγια: Τί συνιστᾶ την «ύλικότητα» πριν από την δημιουργία τῆς ὕλης; Στο ἐρώτημα αὐτό ό Πλάτων δέν μπόρεσε νά ἀπαντήσῃ ὡς τό τέλος. Ἀναφέρει ἀπλῶς ὅτι, πριν από την δημιουργία ὅλα αὐτά τά στοιχεῖα (πῦρ, κλπ.) ἦσαν χωρίς λόγο καί μέτρο καί γενικῶς ἦσαν στήν κατάσταση πού ἦταν φυσικό νά εὑρίσκεται κάθε πρᾶγμα ἀπό τό όποϊον λείπει ό θεός (53 c) . Σέ αὐτά, εὑρισκόμενα τότε σέ αὐτή την φυσική κατάσταση, ἔδωσε γιά πρώτη φορά ό θεός τίς μορφές των, μέ την ἐνέργεια τῶν ιδεῶν καί τῶν ἀριθμῶν (53 c). Ἀλλά βεβαίως αὐτό δέν συνιστᾶ ἀπάντηση. Καί είναι γεγονός ὅτι ό Πλάτων δέν μπόρεσε νά ξεπεράσῃ τό συγκεκριμένο πρόβλημα τῆς ἀντιλήψεως τῆς ὕλης στόν *Τίμαιο*. Έτσι ό Πλάτων λέει τό τί δέν είναι κατάσταση πρὸ τῆς δημιουργίας ἀλλά δέν λέει τί είναι. Ἀρκεῖται στό νά δηλώσῃ ὅτι *κάτι* ὑπῆρχε —ἀλλά *κάτι* τό όποϊον δέν μπορεῖ νά ὀνομασθεῖ, καί βεβαίως *κάτι* πού δέν είναι ἡ ὕλη ή όποία ἀποτελεῖ τό «σῶμα» τοῦ σύμπαντος μετὰ την δημιουργία.

Παναγιώτης ΤΖΑΜΑΛΙΚΟΣ