The Argument of Tim. 27 d ff.

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ti to dei, geneos de oux echon, kai ti to gignomeon [dei], de ou de oidepote; (Pl. Tim. 27 d 6 - 28 a 1).

'What is that which eternally is, and what is that which comes into being, and never is?'

As Whittaker has pointed out,1 dei after geneos is even more poorly attested than the Burnet app. crit. suggests,2 and can, I think, be accounted for by the simple hypothesis of a scribal interpolation (a) to complete the apparent verbal parallelism with the immediately antecedent to dei (d 6), and (b) to reinforce what seems at first sight to be a clear reference to the Republic doctrine (475 e 9 ff.) of a world of eternal Forms on the one hand, in which geneos (taken as either 'beginning' or 'process' or both) plays no part, and the world of space-time, a meta, ti between to dei and to mou, whose prime characteristic is geneos ('process') on the other. But such a reference is in fact quite inappropriate to the context: the whole object of 28 c-d is to distinguish things that come into existence from things that do not, and then to see into which of the two classes dei epav6s falls. (This is not, of course, to suggest that the Republic doctrine of the world of space-time as 'process' has been abandoned; simply that it is not relevant to Plato's present argument.) Reading dei, Cornford finds the 'first premiss' of Plato's argument (ti to dei - oidepote;) and the statement (28 b 7) that the universe 'has come to be' (gyoove) in formal contradiction, and concludes, following Proclus, that gyoove is to be understood as 'eternally in process of change.'3 But why Plato should begin a critical philosophical discussion with a premiss formally contradicted by what follows is not immediately clear; nor, even were this the case, is it clear why we should accept the doctrine to be found in the (supposed) premiss, rather than the doctrine of the subsequent passage, which is set forth at greater length and with apparently equal force. The problem is the commentators', not Plato's, whose own argument (27 d 6 - 28 c 3) is clear, concise, and without inner contradiction. It runs as follows:

1. A Form, which has no beginning, is to be distinguished from a sense-object, which does have one (27 d 6 - 28 a 4)
2. All things that have a beginning (i.e., are sense-objects) do so thanks to some causal agent (28 a 4-6)
3. The world itself is a sense-object, and consequently
(a) came into being (γέγονεν, 28 b 7)
(b) did so thanks to a causal agent (28 c 2-3) (28 b 2 - c 3)

It will be noticed that under (1) I talk of 'a Form' and 'a sense-object-', rather than 'the World of Forms' and 'the World of sense-objects'. This is deliberate. Given that general nouns of the form τὸ + participle or τὸ + adjective can in theory refer either to the class or to an individual member thereof, commentators have invariably hitherto taken the references at 27 d 6 to be to the classes of τὸ ὄν and τὸ γιγνόμενον, and certainly a reading ἄει at 28 c 1 would appear to reinforce such an interpretation. But once it is seen that the ἄει at 28 c 1 is not Plato’s at all, the interpretation in terms of class becomes no more likely than the interpretation in terms of individual member, and the revealing phrase γιγνόμενον καὶ ἀπολλύμενον (28 a 3; cf. 52 a 6-7) – which from the structure of the argument clearly has the same referent as τὸ γιγνόμενον at 27 d 6 – provides the clinching piece of evidence that it is in fact class-members that are in question, not classes themselves. For there is no suggestion in the Timaeus that the world of space-time itself is subject to cyclical genesis and destruction.4 If, however, the phrases γιγνόμενον καὶ ἀπολλύμενον and τὸ γιγνόμενον refer to 'any sense-object', the phrase τὸ ὄν will pari passu refer to 'any Form', and I so translate. (The same, it should be added, can be said of the passage 52 a 1-7, where specific reference is this time made to 'the Form' (τὸ εἶδος) – i.e. the class-member – by contrast with its ὀμόνυμον. . . γιγνόμενον τε ἐν τινι τόπω καὶ πάλιν ἐκεῖθεν ἀπολλύμενον (i.e. the class-member of τὸ γιγνόμενον).

Once the initial premiss of 27 d 6 - 28 a 4 is understood in terms of Form (without a beginning) and sense-object (with a beginning), Plato’s argument is readily intelligible. Should it be understood instead in terms of two universes, one of permanence and one of process, the subsequent arguments risk either being explained away (in the tradition of Xenocrates and Proclus), or – much worse – mistranslated to suit the (supposed) content of the premiss, or both; and Cornford’s rendering falls into the latter category. τῷ γενομένῳ, for example (28 c 1), he translates ‘that which becomes’ (my italics), rather than that which came into being: ἦν at 30 a 2 is translated ‘is’ (rather than ‘was’); παραγενέσθαι at 30 b 3 is translated ‘be present’ (my italics), rather than ‘come to be present’; τὸ γενόμενον at 31 b 4 is translated ‘that which comes to be’ (my italics), rather than ‘that which came to be’, etc. It is one thing to claim that Plato says X, but means Y; it is quite another thing so to mistranslate the Greek as to suggest that Plato did not really say X in the first place.5