Matter and Flux in Plato’s Timaeus

MARY LOUISE GILL

I

In a well-known passage in the *Theaetetus* (182c1-183b5), Plato describes a radical Heraclitean position according to which all things change both in place and in character. Although the theory becomes tied to an account of perception discussed earlier in the dialogue, the Heraclitean position as introduced is quite general. And the conclusion Plato draws would seem to apply to any item subject to Heraclitean flux: if something is radically impermanent, both moving in space and altering its character, then nothing can be said of it, except perhaps “not even such” used in an indefinite way.

The *Timaeus* appears to be concerned with just such a Heraclitean world. At 49a6-c7 Plato raises a difficulty about fire and things like fire. He remarks of such things that “it is difficult to tell which of these one must say is really water rather than fire, and which any one thing rather than all and each, so as to use language which is trustworthy and secure” (49b2-5). The trouble is that what we now call “water,” we see being compacted to generate earth and stone or being dispersed to generate air, and that being inflamed to generate fire. Since these phenomenal stuffs keep changing, how can we say that any one of them is really one thing (e.g. water) rather than some other? Plato then says:

So, since each of these [i.e., water and fire, etc.] never appears the same, which of them can one confidently assert without shame to be this – whatever it is – and not something else? It is not possible. But by far the safest way to speak of them is the following: what we see always coming to be different at different times, for instance, fire, [it is safest] on each occasion not to call fire “this” but “what is such.” nor water “this” but always “what is such,” nor anything else [“this”] as though it had some permanence, among the things we point to using the expression “that” and “this,” and think we indicate something; for it slips away and does not await the charge of

Phronesis 1987. Vol. XXXII/1 (Accepted October 1986)
No, [it is safest] not to call each of them [i.e., “this” or “that”] but, concerning each and all of them, to call [them] thus: “what is such, always moved around and like,” for example, to call fire “what is altogether such,” and so with anything else that comes to be. But that in which each of these appears always to be coming to be and from which they are again destroyed, that alone [it is safest] to address using the expressions “this” and “that,” but what is some sort, hot or white or any one of the opposites, and all the things composed of these, to call none of these that [i.e., “this” or “that”]. (49c7-50a4)

My translation conforms in basic outline to the traditional reading. On this construal the passage says that we should not use the expressions “that” and “this” of fire and things like fire because such items “slip away and do not await the charge of being ‘this’ of ‘that’ or any expression which indicts them of being permanent.” And in the gold analogy which follows, Plato speaks of the shapes in gold as changing even as we refer to them (50b2-3). Such items do seem to be subject to Heraclitean radical flux. They move through space and turn into each other. But contrary to the Theaetetus conclusion, Plato says that such an item can be called “τὸ τοιοῦτον.”

The conflict between this passage and the Theaetetus is one reason why

---

1 Following most recent commentators. I excuse καὶ τὴν τῶδε at 49e3. For objections to other conjectured readings, see H. Cherniss, “A Much Misread Passage in the Timaeus (Timaeus 49c7-50b5).” American Journal of Philology 75 (1954), 113-130, p. 118 n. 6.
2 The shift from singular to plural is a problem for any reading of the passage. I take the subject of φεύγει to pick up the reference of the τι immediately preceding, which itself specifies any member (ἄλλο μιθέων. d7) of the class of things we try to indicate (δόσα δεικνύσεις d7-e1) using the expression “that” and “this.” Since Plato is considering any member of a class of items which are rapidly changing, it is not hard to see why he might shift to the plural. οὐσία at e4 presumably picks up the reference of δόσα at d7.
3 Many commentators have been bothered about the significance of οὕτω at e6, which is particularly problematic for the alternative interpretation given by Cherniss and those who adopt versions of his reading. I give a different order to my translation, but I am following F.M. Cornford, Plato’s Cosmology (London, 1937), 179, n. 4 (cf. Norman Gulley, “The Interpretation of Plato, Timaeus 49D-E.” American Journal of Philology 81 (1960), 53-64, p. 54, n. 4) in assuming that οὕτω resumes the long phrase that precedes. “τὸ τοιοῦτον ἡ δὲ περιφερομένου δομοῦ” specifies how we should specify each and all changing phenomena, if we wish to use language which is trustworthy and secure (49b5). For the significance of the long phrase and the subsequent “τὸ δία παντός τοιοῦτον,” see below, Section IV. For a different treatment of οὕτω and the preceding long phrase, which I have not adopted but which also seems plausible, see Donald Zeyl, “Plato and Talk of a World in Flux: Timaeus 49a6-50b5.” Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 79 (1975), 125-148, pp. 138-139.
4 This reading was first challenged by Cherniss (1954). Since Cherniss offered his alternative proposal, the traditional reading has been defended by Gulley (1960) and Zeyl (1975).